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ISAAC ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE

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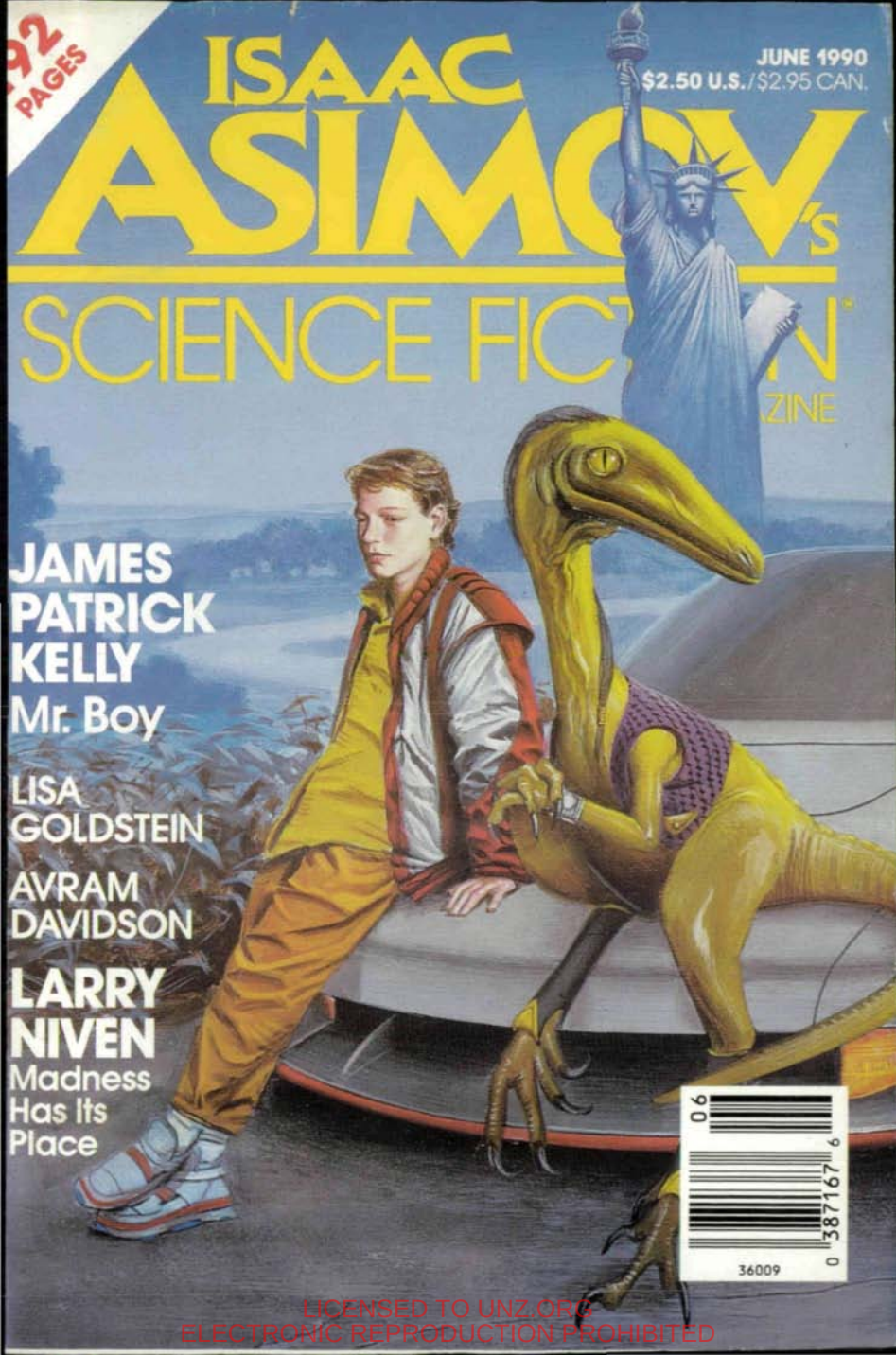

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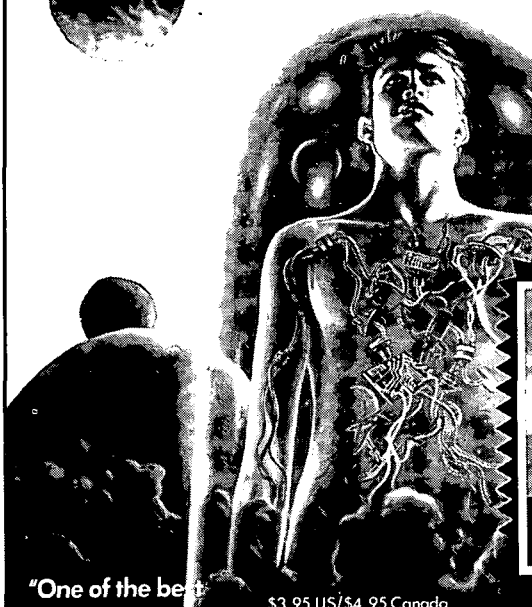

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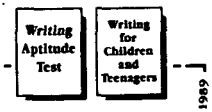

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Alvin Tresselt was Editor of Parents' Magazine Press, *Humpty Dumpty's Magazine*, and a board member of the Author's Guild. His 53 books for young readers have sold over two million copies.

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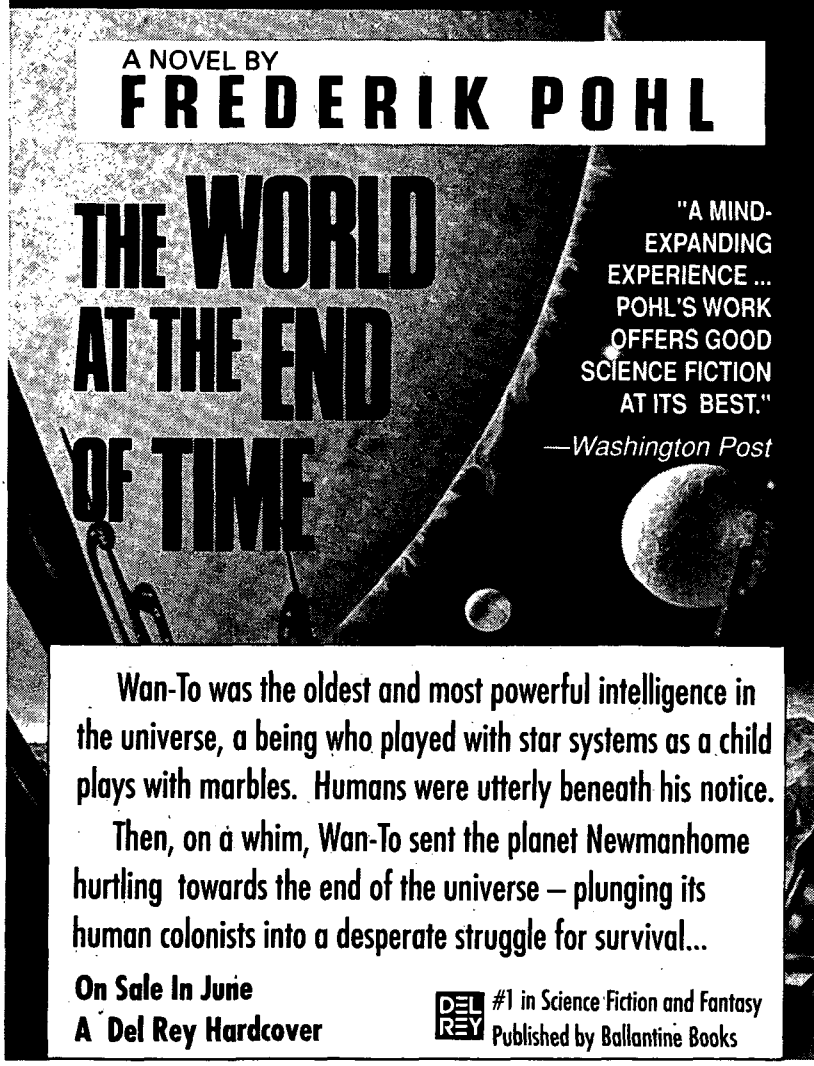
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EDITORIAL

by Isaac Asimov

ENGLISH

I am in love with the English language. Though I consider myself a global creature who would like to do away with narrow-minded nationalisms, I cannot rid myself of the notion that the English language is simply better than all others.

This is not because I happen to be able to speak and understand English because, actually, I'm not very good at the language. This may strike you as unbelievable, but it is true.

You see, I was brought up in a bilingual society. The adults about me spoke both Yiddish and English and spoke Yiddish much better than they spoke English. As a result, I was bilingual, too, and I'm *still* bilingual, though I speak English much better than I speak Yiddish.

Everyone who meets me is aware that I speak English with a "Brooklyn accent," but it is also true that I *write* with a Brooklyn accent. How is that possible? Well, Yiddish is, essentially, a dialect of medieval German, and it makes use of German word order.

Thus, in English we would say, "He had not gotten any good out of his reading." In German, however, we are apt to say the equivalent of "Out of his reading, had he not any good gotten." Well, into my writing, this sort of word order, quite against my will, sometimes creeps (see what I mean) and I keep copy-editors busy unwinding my prose. Also, who knows anything about the finer points of punctuation, and assorted grammatical subtleties? Not I! I never went beyond Freshman English. I'm a chemist.

However, just as I am bilingual, so is English. English was originally a strictly Teutonic language. Then in the eleventh century in came the Normans, who spoke a French dialect. Eventually, the two languages melted together and modern English is, as a result, a double language. A surprising number of words exist in both Teutonic and Latinate terms.

Thus we can either "answer" in Teutonic, or "respond" in Latinate. Something is either "hot" or "torrid." It is either "cold" or "frigid." Something can be done "daily" or it can be "diurnal"; it can be "nightly" or it can be "nocturnal." You can be "lovable" or "amiable." And so on, and so on.

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This double language of English gives it a flexibility that German (which is entirely Teutonic) or French (which is entirely Latinate) doesn't have. After all, the two words, one Teutonic and one Latinate, usually have different shades of meaning. "Lovable" and "amiable" are not precise synonyms.

This, in turn, means that you can speak Latinate English when you want to achieve certain effects and Teutonic English when you want to achieve other effects. Teutonic English tends to consist of short, strong words, that are clear and sharp.

"And God said, Let there be light, and there was light."

Every word is one-syllable. Every word is Teutonic. Every word is unmistakable. What if the line had been translated: "Consequently, Deity announced, Allow illumination—ensued illumination." Every word Latinate, and ornate. The meaning is roughly there, but to translate the line in this way would be blasphemous. (Of course, it is hard to make a sentence *entirely* Latinate, because some of the commonest English words, such as "the" and "there" and "and" are so simple and so common that no Latinate equivalents have been allowed.)

Of course, the Latinate version of English has its virtues, too. The words are elaborate, and tend to be multisyllabic. They don't ring sharply, but reverberate. They abandon the absolute clarity of

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meaning for the subtle content of nuance.

Thus, to take my favorite example, let us turn to the tragedy of *Macbeth* and use a passage I've already used in my editorial "Metaphor" half a year ago. Macbeth has just killed Duncan and is having a fit of horrors over it. His hands are bloody, and he sees them as bloody literally and figuratively. The literal blood can be washed off, but the figurative blood—the blood symbolizing the murder of a guest and a king—cannot.

He says, thinking of the figurative blood: "Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood / Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather." And now just listen to this next line:

"The multitudinous seas incarnadine." "Multitudinous" is Latinate and means, very roughly, the Teutonic "great." But consider "multitudinous." It is five syllables long and can't be said quickly (or shouldn't be said quickly). The "m," "l," the "n," and the "s" can be lingered over and the actor's voice, rising and falling, as it pours out those syllables gets into it the feeling of something that is far more than "great." It is *enormous*. If you say "great" you get the meaning, after a fashion, but you lose the poetry.

And how about "incarnadine." It's a Latinate word meaning, roughly, "to dye red." But it means much more than that in the context of this speech. "Incarnadine" contains the Latin word for "meat" so it means "to dye the color of meat", presumably fresh meat dripping with blood. "Incarnadine" is not just to color something red, but to change it to the color of blood.

So what Shakespeare is saying in his Latinate fashion is that Macbeth's hand would turn all the vast and enormous ocean into blood. And then, feeling, perhaps, that the less well-educated portion of the audience would not get the image, in the very next line, he *translates* the earlier line from Latinate English to Teutonic English saying, "Making the green one red."

This would be less powerful, almost laughable, if it stood by itself, but coming immediately after the terrific Latinate of the previous line, it reinforces the image to an almost unbearable intensity. (Goodness! How I wish I could write like that. I know all the words. I just can't put them together the way he did.)

Anyway, the fact that English is a fusion of two languages and has, at every point, alternate ways of saying the same thing, has had an enormously important result. Both German and French are used to the notion that there is only one way to say something and that there is, for that reason, only one *right* way to say anything and any deviation is wrong.

English, however, with no one right way, never got it through its head that there was anything wrong with adopting still other ways of saying something. Therefore, it

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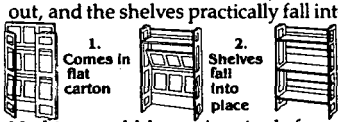

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freely borrowed words from every language under the sun and made them its own. Virtually all of scientific terminology is Greek and Latin—even of quite common objects. For instance, the "telephone" is called that from Greek words meaning "to speak at a distance." We don't have to know what the Greek means, however. The word "telephone" is good enough. It sounds Latinate and that makes it English.

In German, however, something that is Latinate is alien. The telephone is therefore the "Fernsprecher," which, in German, means "to speak at a distance." We would get the same feeling if we insisted on calling a telephone a "far-speaker." In fact, that is the exact version in Teutonic English of "Fernsprecher."

Of course, you may remember that in the great song in *My Fair Lady* in which Henry Higgins wonders why the English don't teach their children how to speak, he muses that the French don't really care what they do as long as they pronounce it correctly.

Well, it seems to me that in English it doesn't matter where a word comes from as long as it is mispronounced correctly. The French "chauffeur" (sho-FEUR) for someone who drives a car, becomes "chauffeur" (SHO-fer) and that makes it English. In the same way, "garage" (gah-RAHZH) which is French for a building housing a car, becomes "garage" (gah-RAHJ) in American and, I think, "garage" (GAR-ij) in British.

On one of my rare trips to Great Britain I was offered a "GAT-o" for dessert. I registered a blank. "What's a GAT-o?" I asked. He showed it to me. It was a cake and I realized he was saying the French "gateau" (ga-TOE) in English.

My dear wife, Janet, was once troubled by hearing the blood rush through her carotid artery when she inserted her ear-plugs (she has an extraordinarily intense sense of hearing) and for a while we spoke frequently of the "BROO-ee" that she heard.

Someone said to me on hearing this mentioned, "Where do they get that word 'BROO-ee'?"

I said, "It just means 'noise.' It's from the French 'bruit.' "

My questioner, a very well-educated woman, was highly incensed at the mispronunciation. After all, the French pronounce it "BRWEE," in one syllable, something only a Gallic throat can do properly.

But, anyway, all this borrowing has given English a vocabulary that is far larger than that of any other language and one that is far more subtle. English has more synonyms with more shades of meaning than any other language and it is the most elaborate vocal tool ever invented, and as I said at the start—I love it. ●

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LETTERS

Dear Dr. Asimov:

I was calmly reading the October 1989 issue when I was brought to a grinding halt by the following passage in Alexander Jablokov's *A Deeper Sea:*

"Thera . . . the great volcano whose eruption had brought an end to Cretan civilization."

Say what, Mr. Jablokov? Classical archeologists have known for generations that Minoan (pre-Hellenic Cretan) civilization was brought to its end by invasion, probably from the mainland. The only modern scholar to adhere to the volcanic-cataclysm theory was Spiros Marinatis, who died in 1974. Since then, scientific testing by a variety of methods has confirmed what archeologists had been saying all along: the eruption of Thera occurred fifty to a hundred years before the abrupt end of Minoan palace civilization, and cannot possibly have been its cause.

Now, where do you get this stuff about classicists not being "practical"?

Sincerely yours,

Louise Hope
undergraduate student
(of Classics, what else?)

My dear, in history a cause is not followed immediately by an effect. There is such a thing as inertia. The eruption of Thera fatally weakened Crete. However, it also did damage to the Greek coastline so that the Myceneans could not take immediate *advantage of Cretan weakness. However, in fifty to a hundred years, the Myceneans managed to do what they would never have done without Thera's eruption.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov and Gardner Dozois:

Thank you very much for your September 1989 issue of your magazine. I have been an avid reader of *Asimov's* for several years, but I have never gotten around to writing you until now (I generally spend too much time reading to bother with correspondence). But two stories in this particular issue moved me like nothing you've published before, and I felt honorbound to congratulate you on your superb taste.

"Dori Bangs" by Bruce Sterling is one of the most moving and tragic tales I've ever had the pleasure of reading. While it's not exactly science fiction or even an outright fantasy, it IS a poignant examination of what might have been if this pair of star-crossed lovers had ever met. For the first time in many a year I was moved to

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tears by a story, and when I finish this letter I am going to make a run to the nearest bookstore and search out every one of Sterling's titles.

Another prime example of the superior quality of your publication's fiction is Allen M. Steele's "Red Planet Blues." It explores some of my favorite topics in science fiction: the possible exploration of Mars and what might be discovered there, the senseless rivalry brought about by the Cold War, and the certainty that we will one day bring the art of warfare into space. The ending was a pleasant surprise, and left me crying for "More!"

The rest of the contents were equally admirable, and I would like to thank you once again for another fantastic issue of *Asimov's*.

Keep up the good work, Mr. Dozois!

Sincerely yours,

J.J. Stambaugh
Knoxville, TN

Thank you. In rating science fiction magazines, as in everything else, *it is easier to write a letter of complaint than one of praise. Therefore, if 10 percent of the readership is annoyed, over 50 percent of the letters we get express that annoyance. (No, I haven't carried out a survey; I'm guessing from what knowledge I have gleaned of human nature.) Anyway, it's nice to get an occasional letter like yours.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dr. Asimov,

I read with great interest your Editorial in the October issue of *IAsfm*. The history of the assassins of the Middle East was indeed enlightening, as the windows of our past have always been fascinating to me. It appeared to me, though, as the Editorial was winding down, that you suffered from a bit of contradiction. Your article first pointed toward offensive books and your willingness to even march against such writings. But a couple of paragraphs later, you denounced a Cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church for "recommending" to his flock not to read a certain book as it offended a different religion.

May I ask, what difference is the willingness to protest a book on the one hand and a recommendation against reading it on the other? In my opinion, a recommendation not to read a book is in the same arena as listening to a TV movie critic telling you not to waste your bucks on a dud of a movie. It is not censorship; but an opinion. Now, if the Cardinal came out and stated that all parishioners who read this book faced excommunication—that would be censorship, just as your willingness to march against what you feel offensive is.

I do agree, though, that censorship is a delicate item. It is one that should be kept away from those who would rather do our thinking for us and be locked up where censorship belongs—in the heart of each individual.

Thanks,

Rex H. Wyers
Key West, FL

My friend, there is a difference. If I were to denounce a book, I would do so only in my own person. There's not a man or woman in the world

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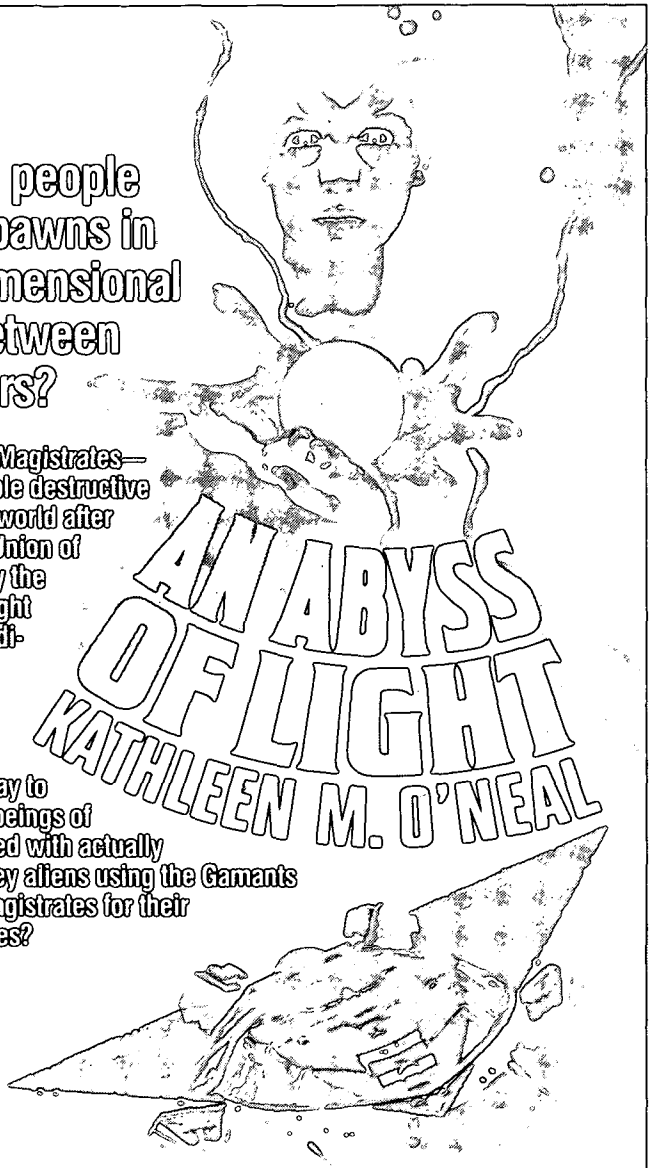

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who would accept my opinion as representing anything but my *opinion. When a Prince of the Church does the same thing, he is speaking from an awesome spiritual height, and millions can't help but think that his voice is the voice of God. Please tell me that you see the difference.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

As a history buff, I have long enjoyed your stories about what I like to think of as the History of the Future. It is therefore with extreme trepidation that I undertake to correct one of such broad and deep erudition as yourself. I noticed, however, a small historical error in your editorial in the October issue of *IAsfm*. The wedding in 336 B.C. at which Philip of Macedon was assassinated was not his own. His death occurred at the games held in celebration of the wedding of his daughter, Kleopatra, to her uncle, Philip's brother-in-law, Alexandros, King of Epirus. The actual wedding ceremony had taken place the previous day.

Philip's wedding to Eurydice, a girl from a noble Macedonian family, took place more than a year earlier, in 337 B.C. It was at this celebration that a drunken brawl erupted in which Alexander drew a sword on Philip, after which he and his mother Olympias were forced to flee. Alexander returned shortly thereafter and he had been reinstated into his father's good graces by the time of Philip's death. At no time was Alexander officially disinherited, and he was at Philip's side when he was killed. One of Philip's own bodyguards was the assassin, stabbing him with a short Celtic dagger. Unfortunately, he was killed by overzealous pursuers before he could be questioned as to the identity of the conspirators.

Thank you for your kind attention.

Sincerely,

M. Eileen Eisemann
Deer Park, NY

Thank you. I accept the correction. A rather erudite book of mine, just out, was reviewed by someone who referred to me as "The Man Who Knows Too Much." I think it's important for people to understand that I don't. *(The reviewer, by the way, wrote anonymously, so I have no hesitation in labeling him as "The Critic who is a Coward Too Much.")*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

I have been a subscriber of *IAsfm* for a little over a year and I am thoroughly entertained by the SF on its pages every month. I often write science fiction literature but have encountered a problem: All the English teachers I have had in school encourage me not to write SF and even give me lower grades, regardless of the quality, when I do. I am also enrolled in a writing program whose instructor detests science fiction, and I am sure I will not get a chance to write SF in the program. I was also rejected from that particular writing program the previous year because the stories I submitted in my portfolio were mainly science fiction.

I would like to ask your advice

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on this matter, Dr. Asimov. Should I continue to write what I want to write, or should I do what my SF-hating teachers want me to do, and write normal fiction. Did you encounter this same problem when you were in high school? I can understand that I should be flexible in my writing, but I don't think my teachers understand what true science fiction is, and are dissuading me from writing it because of their misconceptions about it.

Jason Borenstein, age 15
New Haven, CT

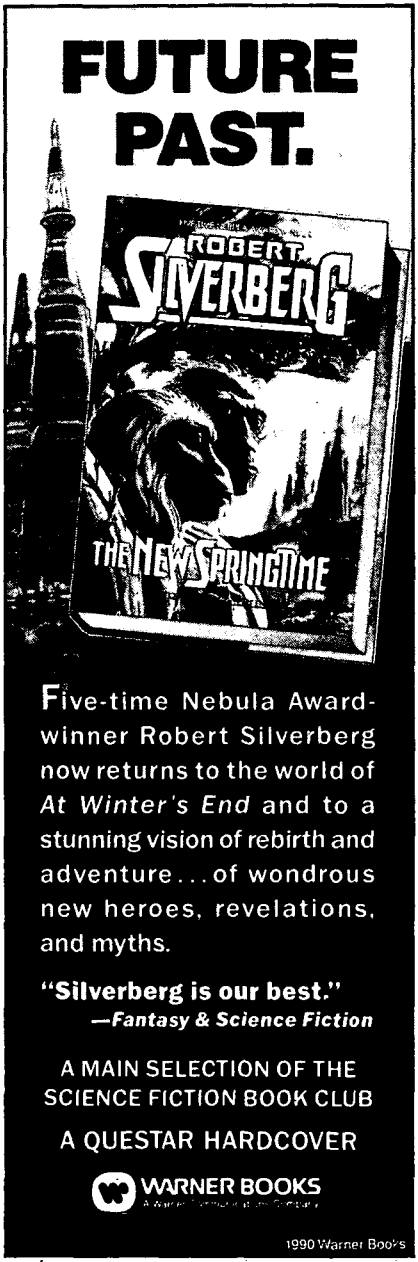
I can't advise you to get into trouble with your teachers, and I don't *advise you to do so. However, when I was in school, I was in constant hot water with the teachers because I insisted on doing things my way, and it worked. However, I didn't ask anybody; I did it on my own.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I have just recently read your editorial, "Sage," and have to admit, finished it somewhat guiltily. I am one of those, now obviously one of many, who have sent in an innocent enough letter asking for gobs of personal insight and knowledge, mine specifically for information on Mr. Campbell for my high school term paper, which was quickly disregarded so that I could "write my own paper." I, of course, was thrilled to get a response from you, realizing only later that it was a mildly accusatory letter pointing out laziness on my part.

But now I get to the heart of my anecdote, for the irony of your words rang deeply and heartily.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This is because of a twist on my teacher's assignment. As a standard, a letter can be used for quotes and other such references. But in her class, receiving a letter from an author we were doing our paper on would land us an automatic "A." She'd confidently told us, though, that that had never happened.

It did not seem like such an overwhelming obstacle, so I chose a favored and easily accessible author (yourself), and wrote a quick letter under the guise of asking for information. (It was not really a deception, for I would have appreciated any information you had offered, regardless.) Upon receiving your letter, I promptly showed it to my teacher. In shock, she grudgingly gave me an "A."

Don't bemoan my lack of education, though. I wrote the paper anyway, waiting until the last minute because I had no worry about my grade. Staying up all night and through a showing of *The Shining,* I finished it and handed it in like everyone else. To my surprise, I would have gotten an "A" anyway. For only one of the two scores was I graded as a "B" (raised to an "A" because of your letter), and not low enough to pull the other grade down. So all that scheming for nothing.

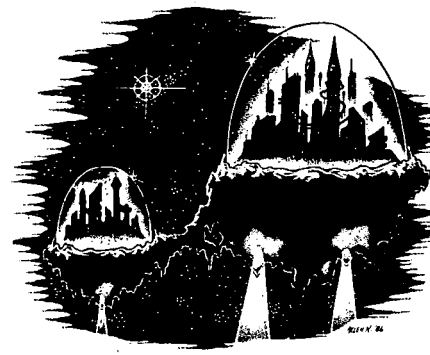
Actually, as my writing needed little help, I wish my teacher had had some provisions for the tests. . . .

A loyal reader,

Jay Michael
Munster, IN

I try to help and to answer when I can. I don't approve of a blanket "A" just because you picked a good-natured victim, but perhaps your teacher has learned better. Despite my good nature, when a reader drives me past endurance and I snap at him (or her) I sometimes get a letter accusing me of arrogance and of other high crimes. I got a letter like that today.

—Isaac Asimov



SPECIAL NOTICE TO READERS

This year marks the beginning of a new development—the addition of double issues to *IAsfm*'s schedule. Currently, *IAsfm* is published every four weeks, or thirteen times a year.

Our November 1990 issue will be virtually double the size of a standard one, providing our readers with even more of the exciting editorial material you have come to expect from *IAsfm*. In 1991, both our fourteenth-anniversary April issue and the November issue will be doubled in size and, in subsequent years, the April and November issues will continue to be double ones.

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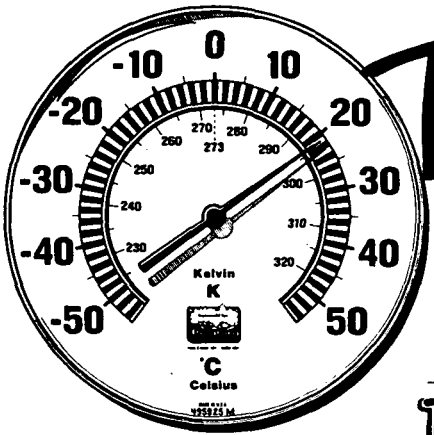

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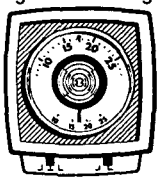

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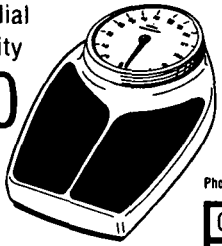

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NEAT STUFF

by Matthew J. Costello

A few weeks ago, Universal Pictures invited me to fly out to visit the set of William Friedkin's new film, *The Guardian*, and watch the filming of the special effects-laden climax. It was an unusual offer because directors are, at best, reluctant to have writers make even a quickie tour of active sets. And a film's finale is usually the most tense time.

Sad to say, I had to turn the intriguing offer down. A week in California didn't fit in with my other plans, but it alerted me to the fact that something interesting might be going on with the production, and Friedkin—always an interesting director . . .

The screenplay of the *The Guardian* is based on Dan Greenburg's 1987 bestseller, *The Nanny*. And no, the novel doesn't detail the plight of Hollywood stars who run off with their kid's overly-attractive au pair. The story is in the tradition of the gothic suspense tale. There's a dark forest and a hideous tree that lives by taking young babies into its fold. A young working couple—that cliché of modern times—hires a nanny who will fight them for their baby.

All right . . . at first blush the story doesn't seem all that compelling. But it *does* have that streamlined feel of the fairy tale, of the struggle between good vs. evil. The tree, a demon god, harkens back to pagan nature worship, an interesting theme that hasn't been done to death in the horror genre.

And, with Friedkin directing, I expected the film to be compelling. It was his first contemporary horror story since his Oscar-winning *The Exorcist* (1973), a landmark which led to the rebirth of the horror film and a host of goofy, gory nutcases who appear in endless sequels.

Although Friedkin says that he is entertained by those splatter pictures, he hopes, in *The Guardian*, to summon a more universal fear than hockey masks and machetes.

"The genre today," Friedkin said, "has become basically a send-up of itself. The *Nightmare on Elm Street* films are good films but they are perceived almost as comedies. That's different than what we're doing here . . ."

The cast includes Dwier Brown *(Field of Dreams)*, Carey Lowell *(Licence to Kill)*, and Jenny Seagrove *(Local Hero)*.

Friedkin re-wrote Stephen Volk's

(Continued on page 63)

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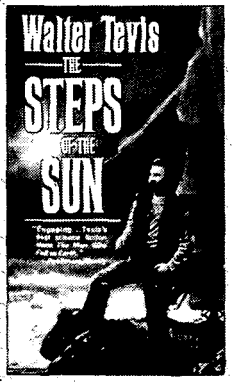

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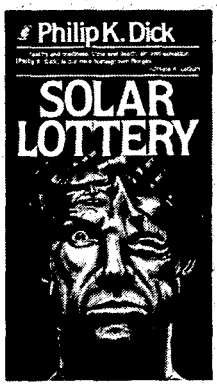

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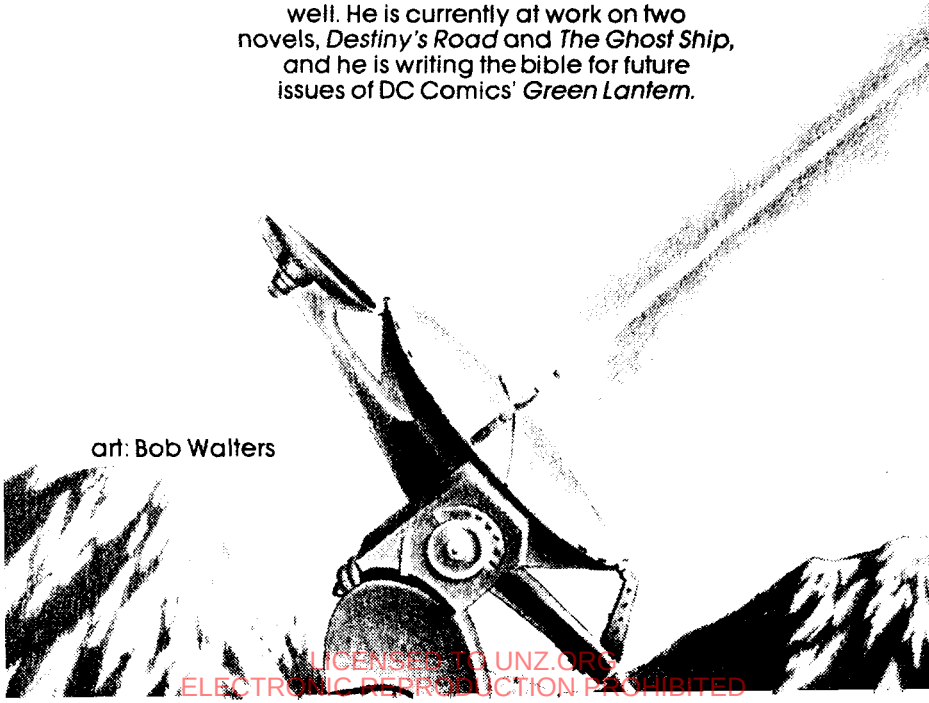
MADNESS HAS ITS PLACE

by Larry Niven

After far too long an absence, we are extremely pleased to welcome Larry Niven back to our pages. Mr. Niven's distinguished literary career has included the Hugo- and Nebula-award winning novel *Ringworld;* a Hugo award for his unforgettable short story "Neutron Star"; and Hugos for three of his other excellent short stories as well. He is currently at work on two novels, *Destiny's Road* and *The Ghost Ship,* and he is writing the bible for future issues of DC Comics' *Green Lantern.*

art: Bob Walters



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I

A lucky few of us know the good days before they're gone.

I remember my eighties. My job kept me in shape, and gave me enough variety to keep my mind occupied. My love life was imperfect but interesting. Modern medicine makes the old fairy tales look insipid; I almost never worried about my health.

Those were the good days, and I knew them. I could remember worse.

I can remember when my memory was better, too. That's what this file is for. I keep it updated for that reason, and also to maintain my sense of purpose.

The Monobloc had been a singles bar since the 2320s.

In the '30s I'd been a regular. I'd found Charlotte there. We held our wedding reception at the Monobloc, then dropped out for twenty-eight years. My first marriage, hers too, both in our forties. After the children grew up and moved away, after Charlotte left me too, I came back.

The place was much changed.

I remembered a couple of hundred bottles in the hologram bar display. Now the display was twice as large and seemed more realistic—better equipment, maybe—but only a score of bottles in the middle were liquors. The rest were flavored or carbonated water, high-energy drinks, electrolytes, a thousand kinds of tea; food to match, raw vegetables and fruits kept fresh by high-tech means, arrayed with low-cholesterol dips; bran in every conceivable form short of injections.

The Monobloc had swallowed its neighbors. It was bigger, with curtained alcoves, and a small gym upstairs for working out or for dating.

Herbert and Tina Schroeder still owned the place. Their marriage had been open in the '30s. They'd aged since. So had their clientele. Some of us had married or drifted away or died of alcoholism; but word of mouth and the Velvet Net had maintained a continuous tradition. Twenty-eight years later they looked better than ever . . . wrinkled, of course, but lean and muscular, both ready for the Gray Olympics. Tina let me know before I could ask: she and Herb were lockstepped now.

To me it was like coming home.

For the next twelve years the Monobloc was an intermittent part of my life.

I would find a lady, or she would find me, and we'd drop out. Or we'd visit the Monobloc and sometimes trade partners; and one evening we'd go together and leave separately. I was not evading marriage. Every woman I found worth knowing, ultimately seemed to want to know someone else.

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I was nearly bald even then. Thick white hair covered my arms and legs and torso, as if my head hairs had migrated. Twelve years of running construction robots had turned me burly. From time to time some muscular lady would look me over and claim me. I had no trouble finding company.

But company never stayed. Had I become dull? The notion struck me as funny.

I had settled myself alone at a table for two, early on a Thursday evening in 2375. The Monobloc was half empty. The earlies were all keeping one eye on the door when Anton Brillov came in.

Anton was shorter than me, and much narrower, with a face like an axe. I hadn't seen him in thirteen years. Still, I'd mentioned the Monobloc; he must have remembered.

I semaphored my arms. Anton squinted, then came over, exaggeratedly cautious until he saw who it was.

"Jack Strather!"

"Hi, Anton. So you decided to try the place?"

"Yah." He sat. "You look good." He looked a moment longer and said, "Relaxed. Placid. How's Charlotte?"

"Left me after I retired. Just under a year after. There was too much of me around and I . . . maybe I was too placid? Anyway. How are you?"

"Fine."

Twitchy. Anton looked twitchy. I was amused. "Still with the Holy Office?"

"Only citizens call it that, Jack."

"I'm a citizen. Still gives me a kick. How's your chemistry?"

Anton knew what I meant and didn't pretend otherwise. "I'm okay. I'm down."

"Kid, you're looking over both shoulders at once."

Anton managed a credible laugh. "I'm not the kid any more. I'm a weekly."

The ARM had made me a weekly at forty-eight. They couldn't turn me loose at the end of the day any more, because my body chemistry couldn't shift fast enough. So they kept me in the ARM building Monday through Thursday, and gave me all of Thursday afternoon to shed the schitz madness. Another twenty years of that and I was even less flexible, so they retired me.

I said, "You do have to remember. When you're in the ARM building, you're a paranoid schizophrenic. You have to be able to file that when you're outside."

"*Hah.* How can anyone—"

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"You get used to the schitz. After I quit, the difference was *amazing*. No fears, no tension, no ambition."

"No Charlotte?"

"Well . . . I turned boring. And what are you doing here?"

Anton looked around him. "Much the same thing you are, I guess. Jack, am I the youngest one here?"

"Maybe." I looked around, doublechecking. A woman was distracting me, though I could see only her back and a flash of a laughing profile. Her back was slender and strong, and a thick white braid ran down her spine, center, two and a half feet of clean, thick white hair. She was in animated conversation with a blonde companion of Anton's age plus a few.

But they were at a table for two: they weren't inviting company. I forced my attention back. "We're gray singles, Anton. The young ones tend to get the message quick. We're slower than we used to be. We *date*. You want to order?"

Alcohol wasn't popular here. Anton must have noticed, but he ordered guava juice and vodka and drank as if he needed it. This looked worse than Thursday jitters. I let him half finish, then said, "Assuming you can tell me—"

"I don't know anything."

"I know the feeling. What *should* you know?"

A tension eased behind Anton's eyes. "There was a message from the *Angel's Pencil*."

"Pencil . . . oh." My mental reflexes had slowed down. The *Angel's Pencil* had departed twenty years ago for . . . was it Epsilon Eridani? "Come on, kid, it'll be in the boob cubes before you have quite finished speaking. Anything from deep space is public property."

"*Hah!* No. It's restricted. I haven't seen it myself. Only a reference, and it must be more than ten years old."

That was peculiar. And if the Belt stations hadn't spread the news through the solar system, *that* was peculiar. No wonder Anton was antsy. ARMs react that way to puzzles.

Anton seemed to jerk himself back to here and now, back to the gray singles regime. "Am I cramping your style?"

"No problem. Nobody hurries in the Monobloc. If you see someone you like—" My fingers danced over lighted symbols on the rim of the table. "This gets you a map. Locate where she's sitting, put the cursor on it. That gets you a display . . . hmm."

I'd set the cursor on the white-haired lady. I liked the readout. "Phoebe Garrison, seventy-nine, eleven or twelve years older than you. Straight. Won a Second in the Gray Jumps last year . . . that's the Americas Skiing

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NEWS FROM Questar

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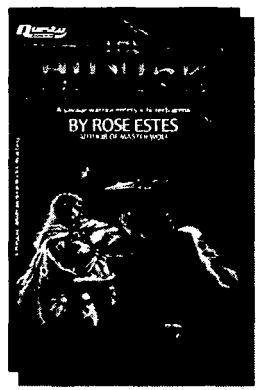

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A WORD FROM Brian Thomsen

Fantasy role-playing games can sometimes provide a very necessary escape from the trials and tribulations of civilization, much in the same way that a good book will. I've been a magic user, and gladiator in some forgotten land, and I have solved numerous crimes in the past and future. To be a hunter or a detective is sometimes more fun than a job in the real world (though obviously there is nothing more fun than being a senior editor at Questar).

When you see me around, ask me what you would get if you crossed SHOGUN and WAR AND REMEMBRANCE, and set it in the far future?

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Matches for seventy and over. She could kick your tail if you don't watch your manners. It says she's smarter than we are, too.

"Point is, she can check you out the same way. Or me. And she probably found this place through the Velvet Net, which is the computer network for unlocked lifestyles."

"So. Two males sitting together—"

"Anyone who thinks we're bent can check if she cares enough. Bends don't come to the Monobloc anyway. But if we want company, we should move to a bigger table."

We did that. I caught Phoebe Garrison's companion's eye. They played with their table controls, discussed, and presently wandered over.

Dinner turned into a carouse. Alcohol was involved, but we'd left the Monobloc by then. When we split up, Anton was with Michiko. I went home with Phoebe.

Phoebe had fine legs, as I'd anticipated, though both knees were teflon and plastic. Her face was lovely even in morning sunlight. Wrinkled, of course. She was two weeks short of eighty and wincing in anticipation. She ate with a cross-country skier's appetite. We told of our lives as we ate.

She'd come to Santa Maria to visit her oldest grandson. In her youth she'd done critical work in nanoengineering. The Board had allowed her four children. (I'd known I was outclassed.) All were married, scattered across the Earth, and so were the grandkids.

My two sons had emigrated to the Belt while still in their twenties. I'd visited them once during an investigation, trip paid for by the United Nations—

"You were an ARM? Really? How interesting! Tell me a story . . . if you can."

"That's the problem, all right."

The interesting tales were all classified. The ARM suppresses dangerous technology. What the ARM buries is supposed to stay buried. I remembered a kind of time compressor, and a field that would catalyze combustion, both centuries old. Both were first used for murder. If turned loose or rediscovered, either would generate more interesting tales yet.

I said, "I don't know anything current. They bounced me out when I got too old. Now I run construction robots at various spaceports."

"Interesting?"

"Mostly placid." She wanted a story? Okay. The ARM enforced more than the killer-tech laws, and some of those tales I could tell.

"We don't get many mother hunts these days. This one was wished on us by the Belt—" And I told her of a lunie who'd sired two clones. One he'd raised on the Moon and one he'd left in the Saturn Conserve. He'd

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moved to Earth, where one clone is any normal citizen's entire birthright. When we found him he was arranging to culture a third clone. . . .

I dreamed a bloody dream.

It was one of those: I was able to take control, to defeat what had attacked me. In the black of an early Sunday morning the shreds of the dream dissolved before I could touch them; but the sensations remained. I felt strong, balanced, powerful, victorious.

It took me a few minutes to become suspicious of this particular flavor of wonderful; but I'd had practice. I eased out from under Phoebe's arm and leg and out of bed. I lurched into the medical alcove, linked myself up and fell asleep on the table.

Phoebe found me there in the morning. She asked, "Couldn't that wait till after breakfast?"

"I've got four years on you and I'm going for infinity. So I'm careful," I told her. Let her think the tube carried vitamin. It wasn't quite a lie . . . and she didn't quite believe me either.

On Monday Phoebe went off to let her eldest grandson show her the local museums. I went back to work.

In Death Valley a semicircle of twenty lasers points at an axial array of mirrors. Tracks run across the desert to a platform that looks like strands of spun caramel. Every hour or so a spacecraft trundles along the tracks, poses above the mirrors, and rises into the sky on a blinding, searing pillar of light.

Here was where I and three companions and twenty-eight robots worked between emergencies. Emergencies were common enough. From time to time Glenn and Skii and ten or twenty machines had to be shipped off to Outback Field or Baikonur, while I held the fort at Death Valley Field.

All of the equipment was old. The original mirrors had all been slaved to one system, and those had been replaced again and again. Newer mirrors were independently mounted and had their own computers, but even these were up to fifty years old and losing their flexibility. The lasers had to be replaced somewhat more often. Nothing was ready to fall apart, quite.

But the mirrors have to adjust their shapes to match distorting air currents all the way up to vacuum; because the distortions themselves must focus the drive beam. A laser at 99.3 percent efficiency is keeping too much energy, getting too hot. At 99.1 percent something would melt, lost power would blow the laser into shrapnel, and a cargo would not reach orbit.

My team had been replacing mirrors and lasers long before I came on

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the scene. This circuit was nearly complete. We had already reconfigured some robots to begin replacing track.

The robots worked alone while we entertained ourselves in the monitor room. If the robots ran into anything unfamiliar, they stopped and beeped. Then a story or songfest or poker game would stop just as abruptly.

Usually the beep meant that the robot had found an acute angle, an uneven surface, a surface not strong enough to bear a loaded robot, a bend in a pipe, a pipe where it shouldn't be . . . a geometrical problem. The robots couldn't navigate just anywhere. Sometimes we'd have to unload the robot and move the load to a cart, by hand. Sometimes we had to pick the robot up with a crane and move it or turn it. Lots of what we did was muscle work.

Phoebe joined me for dinner Thursday evening.

She'd whipped her grandson at laser tag. They'd gone through the museum at Edwards AFB. They'd skied . . . he needed to get serious about that, and maybe get some surgery too . . . .

I listened and smiled and presently tried to tell her about my work. She nodded; her eyes glazed. I tried to tell her how good it was, how restful, after all those years in the ARM.

The ARM: that got her interest back. *Stet.* I told her about the Henry Program.

I'd been saving that. It was an embezzling system good enough to ruin the economy. It made Zachariah Henry rich. He might have stayed rich if he'd quit in time . . . and if the system hadn't been so good, so dangerous, he might have ended in prison. Instead . . . well, let his tongue whisper secrets to the ears in the organ banks.

I could speak of it because they'd changed the system. I didn't say that it had happened twenty years before I joined the ARM. But I was still running out of declassified stories. I told her, "If a lot of people know something can be done, somebody'll do it. We can suppress it and suppress it again—"

She pounced. "Like what?"

"Like . . . well, the usual example is the first cold fusion system. They did it with palladium and platinum, but half a dozen other metals work. And organic superconductors: the patents listed a wrong ingredient. Various grad students tried it wrong and still got it. If there's a way to do it, there's probably a lot of ways."

"That was before there was an ARM. Would you have suppressed superconductors?"

"No. What for?"

"Or cold fusion?"

"No."

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"Cold fusion releases neutrons," she said. "Sheath the generator with spent uranium, what do you get?"

"Plutonium, I think. So?"

"They used to make bombs out of plutonium."

"Bothers you?"

"Jack, the fission bomb was *it* in the mass murder department. Like the crossbow. Like the Ayatollah's Asteroid." Phoebe's eyes held mine. Her voice had dropped; we didn't want to broadcast this all over the restaurant. "Don't you ever wonder just how *much* of human knowledge is lost in that . . . black Limbo inside the ARM building? Things that could solve problems. Warm the Earth again. Ease us through the light-speed wall."

"We don't suppress inventions unless they're dangerous," I said.

I could have backed out of the argument; but that too would have disappointed Phoebe. Phoebe liked a good argument. My problem was that what I gave her wasn't good enough. Maybe I couldn't get angry enough . . . maybe my most forceful arguments were classified. . . .

Monday morning, Phoebe left for Dallas and a granddaughter. There had been no war, no ultimatum, but it felt final.

Thursday evening I was back in the Monobloc.

So was Anton. "I've played it," he said. "Can't talk about it, of course."

He looked mildly bored. His hands looked like they were trying to break chunks off the edge of the table.

I nodded placidly.

Anton shouldn't have told me about the broadcast from *Angel's Pencil*. But he *had*; and if the ARM had noticed, he'd better mention it again.

Company joined us, sampled and departed. Anton and I spoke to a pair of ladies who turned out to have other tastes. (Some bends like to bug the straights.) A younger woman joined us for a time. She couldn't have been over thirty, and was lovely in the modern style . . . but hard, sharply defined muscle isn't my sole standard of beauty. . . .

I remarked to Anton, "Sometimes the vibes just aren't right."

"Yeah. Look, Jack, I have carefully concealed a prehistoric Calvados in my apt at Maya. There isn't really enough for four—"

"Sounds nice. Eat first?"

"Stet. There's *sixteen* restaurants in Maya."

A score of blazing rectangles meandered across the night, washing out the stars. The eye could still find a handful of other space artifacts, particularly around the moon.

Anton flashed the beeper that would summon a taxi. I said, "So you viewed the call. So why so tense?"

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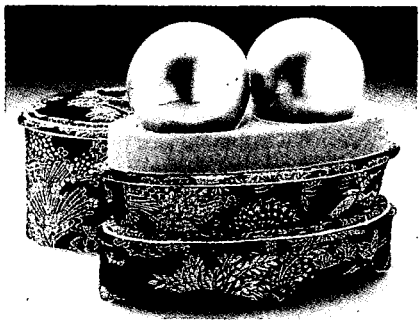

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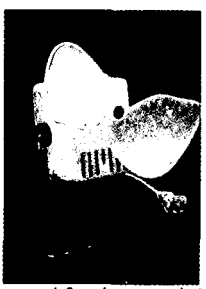

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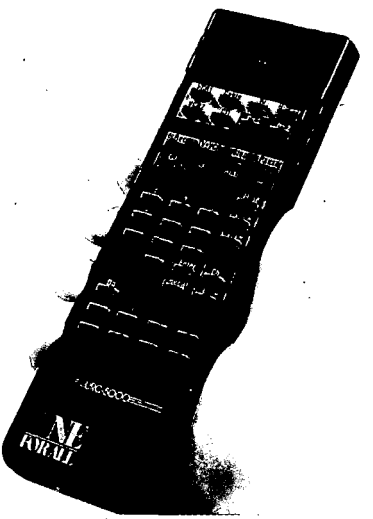

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Security devices no bigger than a basketball rode the glowing sky, but the casual eye would not find those. One must assume they were there. Patterns in their monitor chips would match vision and sound patterns of a mugging, a rape, an injury, a cry for help. Those chips had gigabytes to spare for words and word patterns the ARM might find of interest.

So: no key words.

Anton said, "Jack, they tell a hell of a story. A . . . foreign vehicle pulled alongside Angela at four-fifths of legal max. It tried to cook them."

I stared. *A spacecraft matched course with the* Angel's Pencil *at eighty percent of lightspeed? Nothing man-built could do that. And warlike?* Maybe I'd misinterpreted everything. That can happen when you make up your code as you go along.

But how could the Pencil *have escaped?* "How did Angela manage to phone home?"

A taxi dropped. Anton said, "She sliced the bread with the, you know, motor. I said it's a hell of a story."

Anton's apartment was most of the way up the slope of Maya, the pyramidal arcology north of Santa Maria. Old wealth.

Anton led me through great doors, into an elevator, down corridors. He played tour guide: "The Fertility Board was just getting some real power about the time this place went up. It was built to house a million people. It's never been fully occupied."

"So?"

"So we're en route to the east face. Four restaurants, a dozen little bars. And here we stop—"

"This your apt?"

"No. It's empty, it's always been empty. I sweep it for bugs, but the authorities . . . I *think* they've never noticed."

"Is that your mattress?"

"No. Kids. They've got a club that's two generations old. My son tipped me off to this."

"Could we be interrupted?"

"No. *I'm* monitoring *them*. I've got the security system set to let them in, but only when I'm not here. Now I'll set it to recognize you. Don't forget the number: Apt 23309."

"What is the ARM going to think we're doing?"

"Eating. We went to one of the restaurants, then came back and drank Calvados . . . which we will do, later. I can fix the records at Buffalo Bill. Just don't argue about the credit charge, stet?"

"But— Yah, stet." Hope you won't be noticed, that's the real defense. I was thinking of bailing out . . . but curiosity is part of what gets you

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into the ARM. "Tell your story. You said she *sliced the bread with the, you know, motor?"*

"Maybe you don't remember. *Angel's Pencil* isn't your ordinary Bussard ramjet. The field scoops up interstellar hydrogen to feed a fusion-pumped laser. The idea was to use it for communications, too. Blast a message half across the galaxy with that. A Belter crewman used it to cut the alien ship in half."

"*There's* a communication you can live without. Anton . . . what they taught us in school. A sapient species doesn't reach space unless the members learn to cooperate. They'll wreck the environment, one way or another, war or straight libertarianism or overbreeding . . . remember?"

"Sure."

"So do you believe all this?"

"I think so." He smiled painfully. "Director Bernhardt didn't. He classified the message and attached a memo, too. Six years of flight aboard a ship of limited size, terminal boredom coupled with high intelligence and too much time, elaborate practical jokes, yadda yadda. Director Harms *left* it classified . . . with the cooperation of the Belt. Interesting?"

"But he *had* to have *that.*"

"But they had to agree. There's been more since. *Angel's Pencil* sent us hundreds of detailed photos of the alien ship. It's unlikely they could be faked. There are corpses. Big sort-of cats, orange, more than eight meters tall, big feet and elaborate hands with thumbs. We're in mucking great trouble if we have to face those."

"Anton, we've had three hundred and fifty years of peace. We must be doing something right. The odds say we can negotiate."

"You haven't seen them."

It was almost funny. Jack was trying to make me nervous. Twenty years ago the terror would have been fizzing in my blood. Better living through chemistry! This was all frightening enough; but my fear was a cerebral thing, and I was its master.

I wasn't nervous enough for Anton. "Jack, this isn't just vaporware. A lot of those photos show what's maybe a graviton generator, maybe not. Director Harms set up a lab on the moon to build one for us."

"Funded?"

"Heavy funding. *Somebody* believes in this. But they're getting results! It *works*!"

I mulled it. "Alien contact. As a species we don't seem to handle that too well."

"Maybe this one can't be handled at all."

"What else is being done?"

"Nothing, or damn close. Silly suggestions, career-oriented crap de-

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signed to make a bureau bigger . . . nobody wants to use the magic word. *War.*"

"War. Three hundred and fifty years out of practice, we are. Maybe C. Cretemaster will save us." I smiled at Anton's bewilderment. "Look it up in the ARM records. There's supposed to be an alien of sorts living in the cometary halo. He's the force that's been keeping us at peace this past three and a half centuries."

"Very funny."

"Mmm. Well, Anton, this is a lot more real for you than me. *I* haven't yet seen anything upsetting."

I hadn't called him a liar. I'd only made him aware that I knew nothing to the contrary. For Anton there might be elaborate proofs; but I'd seen nothing, and heard only a scary tale.

Anton reacted gracefully. "Of course. Well, there's still that bottle."

Anton's Calvados was as special as he'd claimed, decades old and quite unique. He produced cheese and bread. Good thing: I was ready to eat his arm off. We managed to stick to harmless topics, and parted friends.

The big catlike aliens had taken up residence in my soul.

Aliens aren't implausible. Once upon a time, maybe. But an ancient ETI in a stasis field had been in the Smithsonian since the opening of the twenty-second century, and a quite different creature— C. Cretemaster's real-life analog—had crashed on Mars before the century ended.

Two spacecraft matching course at near lightspeed, *that* was just short of ridiculous. Kinetic energy considerations . . . why, two such ships colliding might as well be made of antimatter! Nothing short of a gravity generator could make it work. But Anton was *claiming* a gravity generator.

His story was plausible in another sense. Faced with warrior aliens, the ARM would do only what they could not avoid. They would build a gravity generator because the ARM must control such a thing. Any further move was a step toward the unthinkable. The ARM took sole credit (and other branches of the United Nations also took sole credit) for the fact that Man had left war behind. I shuddered to think what force it would take to turn the ARM toward war.

I would continue to demand proof of Anton's story. Looking for proof was one way to learn more, and I resist seeing myself as stupid. But I believed him already.

On Thursday we returned to suite 23309.

"I had to dig deep to find out, but they're not just sitting on their thumbs," he said. "There's a game going in Aristarchus Crater, Belt against flatlander. They're playing peace games."

"Huh?"

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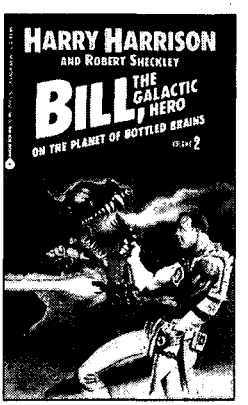

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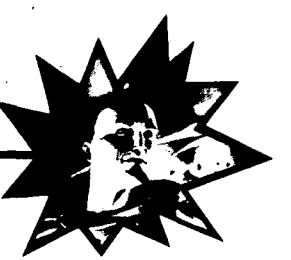

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"Good." Here was my proof. I could check this claim.

"Good. Sure. Peace games." Anton was brooding. Twitchy. "What about war games?"

"How would you run one? Half your soldiers would be dead at the end . . . unless you're thinking of rifles with paint bullets. War gets more violent than that."

Anton laughed. "Picture every building in Chicago covered with scarlet paint on one side. A nuclear war game."

"Now what? I mean for us."

"Yah. Jack, the ARM isn't *doing* anything to put the human race back on a war footing."

"Maybe they've done something they haven't told you about."

"Jack, I don't think so."

"They haven't let you read all their files, Anton. Two weeks ago you didn't know about peace games in Aristarchus. But okay. What *should* they be doing?"

"I don't *know*."

"How's your chemistry?"

Anton grimaced. "How's yours? Forget I said that. Maybe I'm back to normal and maybe I'm not."

"Yah, but you haven't thought of anything. How about weapons? Can't have a war without weapons, and the ARM's been suppressing weapons. We should dip into their files and make up a list. It would save some time, when and if. I know of an experiment that might have been turned into an inertialess drive if it hadn't been suppressed."

"Date?"

"Early twenty-second. And there was a field projector that would make things burn, late twenty-third."

"I'll find 'em." Anton's eyes took on a faraway look. "There's the archives. I don't mean just the stuff that was built and then destroyed. The archives reach all the way back to the early twentieth. Stuff that was proposed, tanks, orbital beam weapons, kinetic energy weapons, biologicals—"

"We don't want biologicals."

I thought he hadn't heard. "Picture crowbars six feet long. A short burn takes them out of orbit, and they steer themselves down to anything with the silhouette you want . . . a tank or a submarine or a limousine, say. Primitive stuff now, but at least it would *do* something." He was really getting into this. The technical terms he was tossing off were masks for horror. He stopped suddenly, then, "Why not biologicals?"

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"Nasty bacteria tailored for *us* might not work on warcats. We want *their* biological weapons, and we don't want them to have ours."

". . . Stet. Now here's one for you. How would you adjust a 'doc to make a normal person into a soldier?"

My head snapped up. I saw the guilt spread across his face. He said, "I had to look up your dossier. *Had* to, Jack."

"Sure. All right, I'll see what I can find." I stood up. "The easiest way is to pick schitzies and train *them* as soldiers. We'd start with the same citizens the ARM has been training since . . . date classified, three hundred years or so. People who need the 'doc to keep their metabolism straight, or else they'll ram a car into a crowd, or strangle—"

"We wouldn't find enough. When you need soldiers, you need thousands. Maybe millions."

"True. It's a rare condition. Well, good night, Anton."

I fell asleep on the 'doc table again.

Dawn poked under my eyelids and I got up and moved toward the holophone. Caught a glimpse of myself in a mirror. Rethought. If David saw me looking like this, he'd be booking tickets to attend the funeral. So I took a shower and a cup of coffee first.

My eldest son looked like I had: decidedly rumpled. "Dad, can't you read a clock?"

"I'm sorry. Really." These calls are so expensive that there's no point in hanging up. "How are things in Aristarchus?"

"Clavius. We've been moved out. We've got half the space we used to, and we'd need twice the space to hold everything we own. Ah, the time change isn't your fault, Dad, we're all in Clavius now, all but Jennifer. She—" David vanished.

A mechanically soothing voice said, "You have inpinged on ARM police business. The cost of your call will be refunded."

I looked at the empty space where David's face had been. I *was* ARM . . . but maybe I'd already heard enough.

My granddaughter Jennifer is a medic. The censor program had reacted to her name in connection with David.

David said she wasn't with him. The whole family had been moved out but for Jennifer.

If she'd stayed on in Aristarchus . . . or been kept on . . .

Human medics are needed when something unusual has happened to a human body or brain. Then they study what's going on, with an eye to writing more programs for the 'docs. The bulk of these problems are psychological.

Anton's "peace games" must be stressful as Hell.

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II

Anton wasn't at the Monobloc Thursday. That gave me another week to rethink and recheck the programs I'd put on a dime disk; but I didn't need it.

I came back the next Thursday. Anton Brillov and Phoebe Garrison were holding a table for four.

I paused—backlit in the doorway, knowing my expression was hidden—then moved on in. "When did you get back?"

"Saturday before last," Phoebe said gravely.

It felt awkward. Anton felt it too; but then, he would. I began to wish I didn't ever have to see him on a Thursday night.

I tried tact. "Shall we see if we can conscript a fourth?"

"It's not like that," Phoebe said. "Anton and I, we're *together*. We had to tell you."

But I'd never thought . . . I'd never *claimed* Phoebe. Dreams are private. This was coming from some wild direction. "Together as in?"

Anton said, "Well, not married, not yet, but thinking about it. And we wanted to talk privately."

"Like over dinner?"

"A good suggestion."

"I like Buffalo Bill. Let's go there."

Twenty-odd habitues of the Monobloc must have heard the exchange and watched us leave. *Those three long-timers seem friendly enough, but too serious . . . and three's an odd number . . .*

We didn't talk until we'd reached Suite 23309.

Anton closed the door before he spoke. "She's in, Jack. Everything."

I said, "It's really love, then."

Phoebe smiled. "Jack, don't be offended. Choosing is what humans do."

Trite, I thought, and *skip it.* "That bit there in the Monobloc seemed overdone. I felt excessively foolish."

"That was for *them.* My idea," Phoebe said. "After tonight, one of us may have to go away. This way we've got an all-purpose excuse. You leave because your best friend and favored lady closed you out. Or Phoebe leaves because she can't bear to ruin a friendship. Or big, burly Jack drives Anton away. See?"

She wasn't just in, she was taking over. Ah, well. "Phoebe, love, do you believe in murderous cats eight feet tall?"

"Do you have any doubts, Jack?"

"Not any more. I called my son. Something secretive is happening in Aristarchus, something that requires a medic."

She only nodded. "What have you got for us?"

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I showed them my dime disk. "Took me less than a week. Run it in an autodoc. Ten personality choices. The chemical differences aren't big, but . . . infantry, which means killing on foot and doesn't have anything to do with children . . . where was I? Yah. Infantry isn't at all like logistics, and neither is like espionage, and Navy is different yet. We may have lost some of the military vocations over the centuries. We'll have to re-invent them. This is just a first cut. I wish we had a way to try it out."

Anton set a dime disk next to mine, and a small projector. "Mine's nearly full. The ARM's stored an incredible range of dangerous devices. We need to think hard about where to store this. I even wondered if one of us should be emigrating, which is why—"

"To the Belt? Further?"

"Jack, if this all adds up, we won't have *time* to reach another star."

We watched stills and flat motion pictures of weapons and tools in action. Much of it was quite primitive, copied out of deep archives. We watched rock and landscape being torn, aircraft exploding, machines destroying other machines . . . and imagined flesh shredding.

"I could get more, but I thought I'd better show you this first," Anton said.

I said, "Don't bother."

"What? Jack?"

"It only took us a week! Why risk our necks to do work that can be duplicated that fast?"

Anton looked lost. "We need to do *something*!"

"Well, maybe we don't. Maybe the ARM is doing it all for us."

Phoebe gripped Anton's wrist hard, and he swallowed some bitter retort. She said, "Maybe we're missing something. Maybe we're not looking at it right."

"What's on your mind?"

"Let's *find* a way to look at it differently." She was looking straight at me.

I said, "Stoned? Drunk? Fizzed? Wired?"

Phoebe shook her head. "We need the schitz view."

"Dangerous, love. Also, the chemicals you're talking about are massively illegal. *I* can't get them, and Anton would be caught for sure—" I saw the way she was smiling at me. "Anton, I'll break your scrawny neck."

"Huh? Jack?"

"No, no, he didn't tell me," Phoebe said hastily, "though frankly I'd think either of you might have trusted me that much, Jack! I remembered you in the 'doc that morning, and Anton coming down from that twitchy state on a Thursday night, and it all clicked."

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"Okay."

"You're a schitz, Jack. But it's been a long time, hasn't it?"

"Thirteen years of peace," I said. "They pick us for it, you know. Paranoid schizophrenics, born with our chemistry screwed up, hair trigger temper and a skewed view of the universe. Most schitzies never have to feel that. We use the 'docs more regularly than you do and that's that. But some of us go into the ARM. . . . Phoebe, your suggestion is still silly. Anton's crazy four days out of the week, just like I used to be. Anton's all you need."

"Phoebe, he's right."

"No. The ARM used to be *all* schitzies, right? The genes have thinned out over three hundred years."

Anton nodded. "They tell us in training. The ones who could be Hitler or Napoleon or Castro, they're the ones the ARM wants. They're the ones you can send on a mother hunt, the ones with no social sense . . . but the Fertility Board doesn't let them breed either, unless they've got something special. Jack, you were special, high intelligence or something—"

"Perfect teeth, and I don't get sick in free fall, and Charlotte's people never develop back problems. That helped. Yah . . . but every century there are less of us. So they hire some Antons too, and *make* you crazy—"

"But carefully," Phoebe said. "Anton's not evolved for paranoia, Jack. You are. When they juice Anton up they don't make him too crazy, just enough to get the viewpoint they want. I bet they leave the top management boringly sane. But *you*, Jack—"

"I *see* it." Centuries of ARM tradition were squarely on her side.

"*You* can go as crazy as you like. It's all natural, and medics have known how to handle it since Only One Earth. We need the schitz viewpoint, and we don't have to steal the chemicals."

"Stet. When do we start?"

Anton looked at Phoebe. Phoebe said, "Now?"

We played Anton's tape all the way through, to a running theme of graveyard humor.

"I took only what I thought we could use," Anton said. "You should have seen some of the rest. Agent Orange. Napalm. Murder stuff."

Phoebe said, "Isn't this murder?"

That remark might have been unfair. We were watching this bizarre chunky rotary-blade flyer. Fire leaped from underneath it, once and again . . . weapons of some kind.

Anton said, "Aircraft design isn't the same when you use it for murder. It changes when you expect to be shot at. Here—" The picture had

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changed. "That's another weapons platform. It's not just fast, it's supposed to hide in the sky. Jack, are you all right?"

"I'm scared green. I haven't felt any effects yet."

Phoebe said, "You need to relax. Anton delivers a terrific massage. I never learned."

She wasn't kidding. Anton didn't have my muscle, but he had big strangler's hands. I relaxed into it, talking as he worked, liking the way my voice wavered as his hands pounded my back.

"It hasn't been that long since a guy like me let his 'doc run out of beta-dammasomething. An indicator light ran out and he didn't notice. He tried to kill his business partner by bombing his partner's house, and got some family members instead."

"We're on watch," Phoebe said. "If you go berserk we can handle it. Do you want to see more of this?"

"We've missed something. Children, I'm a *registered* schitz. If I don't use my 'doc for three days, they'll be trying to find me before I remember I'm the Marsport Strangler."

Anton said, "He's right, love. Jack, give me your door codes. If I can get into your apt, I can fix the records."

"Keep talking. Finish the massage, at least. We might have other problems. Do we want fruit juice? Munchies? Foodlike substances?"

When Anton came back with groceries, Phoebe and I barely noticed.

Were the warcats real? Could we fight them with present tech? How long did Sol system have? And the other systems, the more sparsely settled colony worlds? Was it enough to make tapes and blueprints of the old murder machines, or must we set to building clandestine factories? Phoebe and I were spilling ideas past each other as fast as they came, and I had quite forgotten that I was doing something dangerous.

I noticed myself noticing that I was thinking much faster than thoughts could spill from my lips. I remembered knowing that Phoebe was brighter than I was, and that didn't matter either. But Anton was losing his Thursday edge.

We slept. The old airbed was a big one. We woke to fruit and bread and dived back in.

We re-invented the Navy using only what Anton had recorded of seagoing navies. We had to. There had never been space navies; the long peace had fallen first.

I'm not sure when I slid into schitz mode. I'd spent four days out of seven without the 'doc, every week for forty-one years excluding vacations. You'd think I'd remember the feel of my brain chemistry changing. Sometimes I do; but it's the central *me* that changes, and there's no way to control that.

Anton's machines were long out of date, and none had been developed

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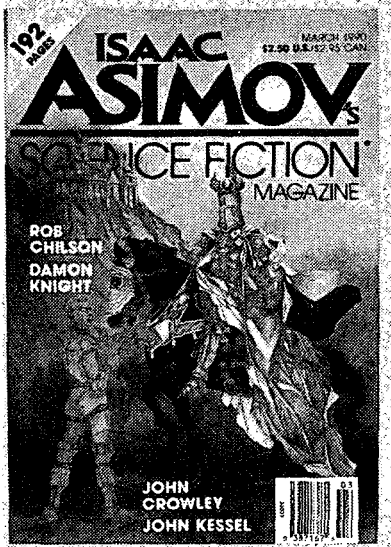

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even for interplanetary war. Mankind had found peace too soon. Pity. But if the warcats' gravity generators could be copied before the warcats arrived, that alone could save us!

Then again, whatever the cats had for weapons, kinetic energy was likely to be the ultimate weapon, *however* the mass was moved. Energy considerations don't lie . . . I stopped trying to anticipate individual war machines; what I needed was overview. Anton was saying very little.

I realized that I had been wasting my time making medical programs. Chemical enhancement was the most trivial of what we'd need to remake an army. Extensive testing would be needed, and then we might not get soldiers at all unless they retained *some* civil rights, or unless officers killed enough of them to impress the rest. Our limited pool of schitzies had better be trained as our officers. For that matter, we'd better start by taking over the ARM. They had all the brightest schitzies.

As for Anton's work in the ARM archives, the most powerful weapons had been entirely ignored. They were too obvious.

I saw how Phoebe was staring at me, and Anton too, both gape-jawed.

I tried to explain that our task was nothing less than the reorganization of humanity. Large numbers might have to die before the rest saw the wisdom in following our lead. The warcats would teach that lesson . . . but if we waited for them, we'd be too late. Time was breathing hot on our necks.

Anton didn't understand. Phoebe was following me, though not well, but Anton's body language was pulling him back and closing him up while his face stayed blank. He feared me worse than he feared warcats.

I began to understand that I might have to kill Anton. I hated him for that.

We did not sleep Friday at all. By Saturday noon we should have been exhausted. I'd caught cat naps from time to time, we all had, but I was still blazing with ideas. In my mind the pattern of an interstellar invasion was shaping itself like a vast three-dimensional map.

Earlier I might have killed Anton, because he knew too much or too little, because he would steal Phoebe from me. Now I saw that was foolish. Phoebe wouldn't follow him. He simply didn't have the . . . the internal power. As for knowledge, he was our only access to the ARM!

Saturday evening we ran out of food . . . and Anton and Phoebe saw the final flaw in their plan.

I found it hugely amusing. My 'doc was halfway across Santa Maria. They had to get me there. Me, a schitz.

We talked it around. Anton and Phoebe wanted to check my conclusions. Fine: we'd give them the schitz treatment. But for that we needed my disk (in my pocket) and my 'doc (at the apt). So we had to go to my

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apt. With that in mind, we shaped plans for a farewell bacchanal. Anton ordered supplies. Phoebe got me into a taxi. When I thought of other destinations she was persuasive. And the party was waiting . . .

We were a long time reaching the 'doc. There was beer to be dealt with, and a pizza the size of Arthur's Round Table. We sang, though Phoebe couldn't hold a tune. We took ourselves to bed. It had been years since my urge to rut ran so high, so deep, backed by a sadness that ran deeper yet and wouldn't go away.

When I was too relaxed to lift a finger, we staggered singing to the 'doc with me hanging limp between them. I produced my dime disk, but Anton took it away. What was this? They moved me onto the table and set it working. I tried to explain: they had to lie down, put the disk here . . . but the circuitry found my blood loaded with fatigue poisons, and put me to sleep.

Sunday noon:

Anton and Phoebe seemed embarrassed in my presence. My own memories were bizarre, embarrassing. I'd been guilty of egotism, arrogance, self-centered lack of consideration. Three dark blue dots on Phoebe's shoulder told me that I'd brushed the edge of violence. But the worst memory was of thinking like some red handed conqueror, and out loud.

They'd never love me again.

But they could have brought me into the apt and straight to the 'doc. Why didn't they?

While Anton was out of the room I caught Phoebe's smile in the corner of my eye, and saw it fade as I turned. An old suspicion surfaced and has never faded since.

Suppose that the women I love are all attracted to Mad Jack. Somehow they recognize my schitz potential, though they find my sane state dull. There must have been a place for madness throughout most of human history. So men and women had sought in each other the capacity for madness. . . .

And so what? Schitzies kill. The real Jack Strather is too dangerous to be let loose.

And yet . . . it had been worth doing. From that strange fifty-hour session I remembered one real insight. We spent the rest of Sunday discussing it, making plans, while my central nervous system returned to its accustomed, unnatural state. Sane Jack.

Anton Brillov and Phoebe Garrison held their wedding reception in the Monobloc. I stood as Best Man, bravely, cheerful, running over with congratulations, staying carefully sober.

A week later I was among the asteroids. At the Monobloc they said

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that Jack Strather had fled Earth after his favored lady deserted him for his best friend.

III

Things ran smoother for me because John Junior had made a place for himself in Ceres.

Even so, they had to train me. Twenty years ago I'd spent a week in the Belt. It wasn't enough. Training and a Belt citizen's equipment used up most of my savings and two months of my time.

Time brought me to Mercury, and the lasers, eight years ago.

Lightsails are rare in the inner solar system. Between Venus and Mercury there are still lightsail races, an expensive, uncomfortable, and dangerous sport. Cargo craft once sailed throughout the asteroid belt, until fusion motors became cheaper and more dependable.

The last refuge of the light-sail is a huge, empty region: the cometary halo, Pluto, and beyond. The light-sails are all cargo craft. So far from Sol, their thrust must be augmented by lasers, the same Mercury lasers that sometimes hurl an unmanned probe into interstellar space.

These were different from the launch lasers I was familiar with. They were enormously larger. In Mercury's lower gravity, in Mercury's windless environment, they looked like crystals caught in spiderwebs. When the lasers fired the fragile support structures wavered like spiderweb in a wind. Each stood in a wide black pool of solar collector, as if tar paper had been scattered at random. A collector sheet that lost fifty percent of power was not removed. We would add another sheet, but continue to use all the available power.

Their power output was dangerous to the point of fantasy. For safety's sake the Mercury lasers must be continually linked to the rest of the solar system across a lightspeed delay of several hours. The newer solar collectors also picked up broadcasts from space, or from the control center in Challenger Crater. Mercury's lasers must never lose contact. A beam that strayed where it wasn't supposed to could do untold damage.

They were spaced all along the planet's equator. They were hundreds of years apart in design, size, technology. They fired while the sun was up and feeding their square miles of collectors, with a few fusion generators for backup. They flicked from target to target as the horizon moved. When the sun set, it set for thirty-odd Earth days, and that was plenty of time to make repairs—

"In general, that is." Kathry Perritt watched my eyes to be sure I was paying attention. I felt like a schoolboy again. "In general we can repair

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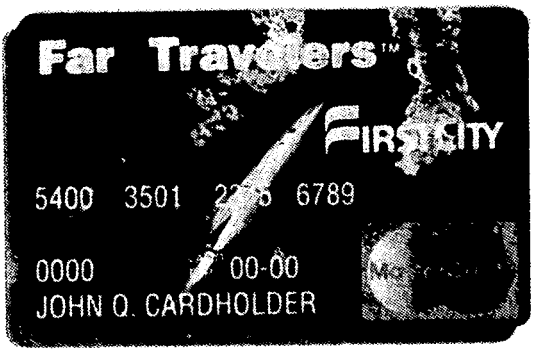

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and update each laser station in turn and *still* keep ahead of the dawn. But come a quake, we work in broad daylight and like it."

"Scary," I said, too cheerfully.

She looked at me. "You feel nice and cool? That's a million tons of soil, old man, and a layer cake of mirror sheeting on top of that, and these old heat exchangers are still the most powerful ever built. Daylight doesn't scare you? You'll get over that."

Kathry was a sixth generation Belter from Mercury, taller than me by seven inches, not very strong, but extremely dextrous. She was my boss. I'd be sharing a room with her . . . and yes, she rapidly let me know that she expected us to be bedmates.

I was all for that. Two months in Ceres had showed me that Belters respond to social signals I don't know. I had no idea how to seduce anyone.

Sylvia and Myron had been born on Mars in an enclave of areologists digging out the cities beneath the deserts. Companions from birth, they'd married at puberty. They were addicted to news broadcasts. News could get them arguing. Otherwise they behaved as if they could read each other's minds; they hardly talked to each other or to anyone else.

We'd sit around the duty room and wait, and polish our skills as storytellers. Then one of the lasers would go quiet, and a tractor the size of some old Chicago skyscraper would roll.

Rarely was there much of a hurry. One laser would fill in for another until the Monster Bug arrived. Then the robots, riding the Monster Bug like one of Anton's aircraft carriers, would scatter ahead of us and set to work.

Two years after my arrival, my first quake shook down six lasers in four different locations, and ripped a few more loose from the sunlight collectors. Landscape had been shaken into new shapes. The robots had some trouble. Sometimes Kathry could reprogram. Otherwise her team had to muscle them through, with Kathry to shout orders and me to supply most of the muscle.

Of the six lasers, five survived. They seemed built to survive almost anything. The robots were equipped to spin new support structure and to lift the things into place, with a separate program for each design.

Maybe John Junior *hadn't* used influence in my behalf. Flatlander muscles were useful, when the robots couldn't get over the dust pools or through the broken rock. For that matter, maybe it wasn't some Belt tradition that made Kathry claim me on sight. Sylvia and Myron weren't sharing; and I might have been female, or bend. Maybe she thought she was lucky.

After we'd remounted the lasers that survived, Kathry said, "They're all obsolete anyway. They're not being replaced."

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"That's not good," I said.

"Well, good and bad. Light-sail cargos are slow. If the light wasn't almost free, why bother? The interstellar probes haven't sent much back yet, and we might as well wait. At least the Belt Speakers think so."

"Do I gather I've fallen into a kind of blind alley?"

She glared at me. "You're an immigrant flatlander. What did you expect, First Speaker for the Belt? You thinking of moving on?"

"Not really. But if the job's about to fold—"

"Another twenty years, maybe. Jack, I'd miss you. Those two—"

"It's all right, Kathry. I'm not going." I waved both arms at the blazing dead landscape and said, "I like it here," and smiled into her bellow of laughter.

I beamed a tape to Anton when I got the chance.

"If I was ever angry, I got over it, as I hope you've forgotten anything I said or did while I was, let's say, running on automatic. I've found another life in deep space, not much different from what I was doing on Earth . . . though that may not last. These light-sail pusher lasers are a blast from the past. Time gets them, the quakes get them, and they're not being replaced. Kathry says twenty years.

"You said Phoebe left Earth, too. Working with an asteroid mining setup? If you're still trading tapes, tell her I'm all right and I hope she is too. Her career choice was better than mine, I expect . . ."

I couldn't think of anything else to do.

Three years after I expected it, Kathry asked. "Why did you come out here? It's none of my business, of course—"

Customs differ: it took her three years in my bed to work up to this. I said, "Time for a change," and "I've got children and grandchildren on the Moon and Ceres and Floating Jupiter."

"Do you miss them?"

I had to say yes. The result was that I took half a year off to bounce around the solar system. I found Phoebe, too, and we did some catching up; but I still came back early. My being away made us both antsy.

Kathry asked again a year later. I said, "What I did on Earth was a lot like this. The difference is, on Earth I'm dull. Here—am I dull?"

"You're fascinating. You won't talk about the ARM, so you're fascinating and mysterious. I can't believe you'd be dull just because of where you are. Why did you leave, really?"

So I said, "There was a woman."

"What was she like?"

"She was smarter than me. I was a little dull for her. So she left, and that would have been okay. But she came back to my best friend." I shifted uncomfortably and said, "Not that they drove me off Earth."

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"No?"

"No. I've got everything I once had herding construction robots on Earth, plus one thing that I wasn't bright enough to miss. I lost my sense of purpose when I left the ARM."

I noticed that Myron was listening. Sylvia was watching the holo walls, the three that showed the face of Mercury: rocks blazing like coals, with only the robots and the lasers to give the illusion of life. The fourth we kept changing. Just then it showed a view up the trunk into the waving branches of the tremendous redwood they've been growing for three hundred years, in Hovestraydt City on the moon.

"These are the good times," I said. "You have to notice, or they'll go right past. We're holding the stars together. Notice how much dancing we do? I'd be too old and creaky for that— Sylvia, *what?*"

Sylvia was shaking my shoulder. I heard it as soon as I stopped talking: *"Tombaugh Station relayed this picture, the last broadcast from the* Fantasy Prince. *Once again, the* Fantasy Prince *has apparently been—"*

Starscape glowed within the fourth holo wall. Something came out of nowhere, moving hellishly fast, and stopped so quickly that it might have been a toy. It was egg-shaped, studded with what I remembered as weapons.

Phoebe won't have made her move yet. The warcats will have to be deep in the solar system before her asteroid mining setup can be any deterrent. Then one or another warcat ship will find streams of slag sprayed across its path, impacting at comet speeds.

By now Anton must know whether the ARM actually has plans to repel an interstellar invasion.

Me, I've already done my part. I worked on the computer shortly after I first arrived. Nobody's tampered with it since. The dime disk is in place.

We kept the program relatively simple. Until and unless the warcats destroy something that's being pushed by a laser from Mercury, nothing will happen. The warcats must condemn themselves. Then the affected laser will lock onto the warcat ship . . . and so will every Mercury laser that's getting sunlight. Twenty seconds, then the system goes back to normal until another target disappears.

If the warcats can be persuaded that Sol system is defended, maybe they'll give us time to build defenses.

Asteroid miners dig deep for fear of solar storms and meteors. Phoebe might survive. We might survive here, too, with shielding built to block the hellish sun, and laser cannon to battle incoming ships. But that's not the way to bet.

We might get one ship.

It might be worth doing. ●

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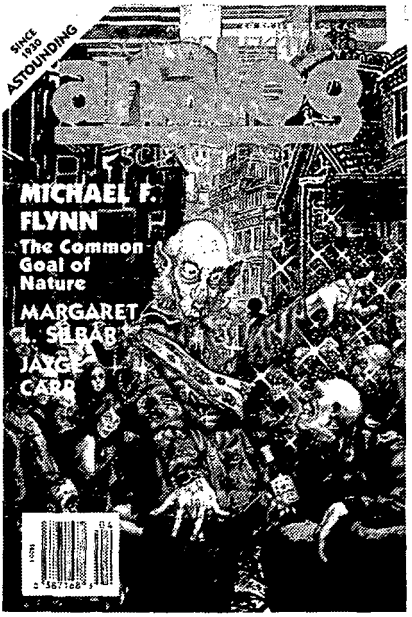

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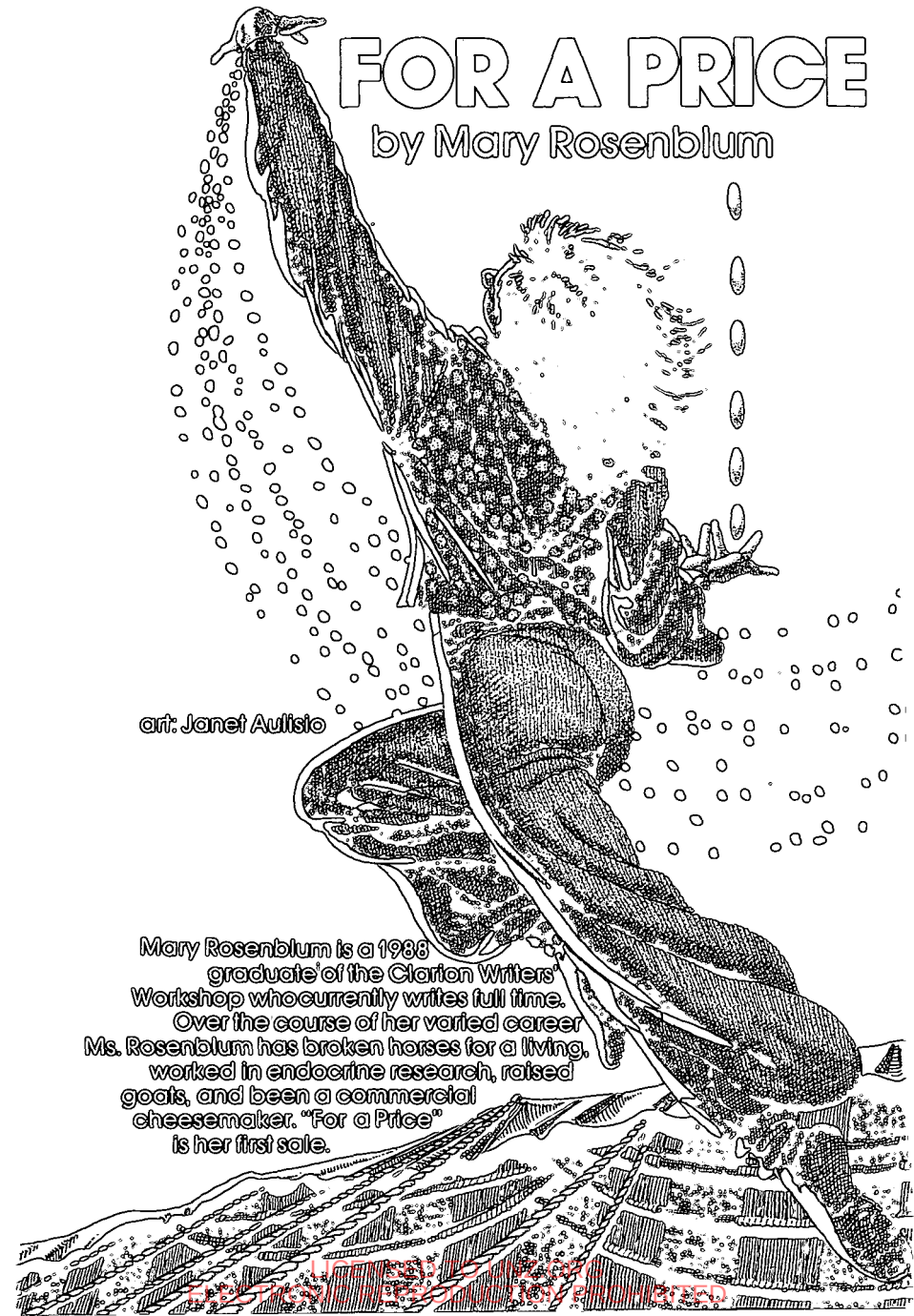
by Mary Rosenblum



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Mary Rosenblum is a 1988 graduate of the Clarion Writers' Workshop who currently writes full time. Over the course of her varied career Ms. Rosenblum has broken horses for a living, worked in endocrine research, raised goats, and been a commercial cheesemaker. "For a Price" is her first sale.

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Reed climbed into the campground behind the two-bit county fair, after the same cop cruised past him twice in fifteen minutes. The mirror-shades had scanned him too intently. And a vagrancy bust would be bad news—the computers would pick up the California warrant in two electronic seconds, and the game would be over.

Damn Raymond to hell.

Trailers and campers lined the fence, crowded in between tall pines. They belonged to exhibitors and carny folk. Reed squinted through the mesh, saw only curtained windows and empty lawn chairs. The coast was clear. Pack dangling from his shoulder, he dug his sneakered toes into the rusty fence and began to climb. A cow bawled in the distance and Reed flinched, stabbing his thigh on the wire points and praying that the blank-eyed trailers shielded him from the rest of the campground. As he swung his leg over, someone shouted hoarsely, off to his left.

Damn. Reed heaved himself over the top of the fence and dropped to the slick pine needles. Run. No, *don't* run, you idiot. Heart pounding, he held his breath, but there was no further alarm. Only someone yelling at a kid. He sucked a scratched palm, fighting the tension that kept winding tighter and tighter in his chest.

It had seemed so easy. Just disappear. No one was going to look too hard for him. It wasn't like he was a murderer or a bank robber. But he hadn't been prepared for the tension—everyone knew who he was; everyone was *after* him. . . .

Someday, Raymond. Someday you're going to pay for all this. Trying to look casual, Reed limped away from the fence.

Pine shade dappled the needled ground. T-shirts and bright towels flapped on a rope clothesline strung between two dusty trailers; the breeze dried the sweat on Reed's face. Four trailers farther up, three girls lounged on blankets spread over stacked hay-bales, brushing green nail polish onto their toenails. They leaned their heads together and giggled, eyes following him with sly interest.

Reed flushed and hurried past, feeling conspicuous and angry. Where the hell was the entrance to the fair? A bored man slouched on a sagging picnic table, reading a newspaper. Boxes of cheap glassware and teddy bears with pastel fur stuffed the back of a seedy white station wagon. Carnival prizes? Someone was frying bacon, and Reed strolled nonchalantly in the other direction, stomach growling.

A bird trilled in the branches over Reed's head, and the door to a big pickup camper swung in the breeze. Reed jumped as it banged against the side of the camper.

Some fool forgot to lock up. Reed's shoulderblades twitched, and he could feel the thin fold of the solitary twenty in his pocket. Trying hard

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to look like he was on his way to take a nap, he strolled down the narrow space between the camper and a blue and white trailer. Fool, a part of his mind was screaming. You're in enough hot water already.

Yeah. For thirty grand I *didn't* steal. He smiled, and it felt ugly. What did a little petty theft matter at this point? "Shirley?" he called through the open door. Not too loud, but loud enough to wake a sleeper. "Hey, Shirley?" No answer.

Heart racing, he swung himself up into the hot, stuffy twilight, took a breath of last night's hamburgers and unmade beds. Greasy pans cluttered the little propane stove. Cash? He opened cupboards, ears straining, muscles twitching with every rustle of pine needles. He found dishes and clothes and a half-empty bottle of bourbon. No money. He slid his palms under the mattress of the bunk bed that had been built-in above the cramped dining booth. Nothing there, either. Damn, damn, damn. He banged his fist on the cigarette-burned Formica of the table.

"You won't find what you're looking for in here." The voice sounded like the wind in the branches, dry, rustling, and amused.

Reed froze, his heart pounding in slow, heavy strokes. Shit. Everything he tried came up *shit*. He turned around slowly, expecting cops, a gun, heavy artillery.

A girl smiled up at him from the doorway, one hip cocked against the frame. She had pale skin, and black eyes that glittered from beneath a fringe of jet bangs. She looked about sixteen. Reed opened his mouth to breathe, and felt the blood seep back into his chest.

"Sorry," he said thickly, and tried a smile. "I think I wandered into the wrong trailer." Original. He edged toward her. Just let me *past,* kid.

"I can help you, you know." She quirked one fine eyebrow at him and didn't move. "Yes, I think I can," she said, and tapped her red, red lips with white-gloved fingers. She had a pointed, elfin face, and was dressed in white—gloves, shirt, and pants—except for a vest patterned in black and multicolored diamonds. Reed wondered if she was a clown.

"Look," he said, "I really feel like an idiot, barging in here like this." His tongue stumbled over the words. "You don't know which trailer belongs to a guy named Paul, do you? Paul Marquette," he rushed on. "He told me to drop by."

She smiled at him and didn't move.

His ploy wasn't working. Reed swallowed panic. She knew damn *well* what he was doing in her trailer. She was playing with him—had probably *already* called the cops. He could read it in the mocking curve of her smile. Reed's muscles bunched into knots. Knock her flat backward out of the doorway, jump down, and run like hell. Sure. Over six feet of chainlink and out into a hayfield as big as Rhode Island, with nice, bare

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country roads all around? Uh huh. How 'bout into the crowd, with this brat screaming rape behind him?

"Sit down," she commanded, and he sat down hard as his muscles involuntarily obeyed her.

You screwed up *again,* he told himself furiously. You deserve the Raymonds. You really do.

"I don't know if that's true," she said, as if he had spoken out loud. "But you're *not* a very good thief." Her small mouth shaped a red smile, and she reached for the bourbon bottle in the cupboard over the sink. "You'd like a drink," she said conversationally; it wasn't a question. She proceeded to fish ice cubes out of the tiny refrigerator beneath the counter and pour him one.

"Thanks," he said, because he couldn't think of anything else to say. I am dreaming, he thought. Or else this bitch is playing some kind of really weird game.

The whiskey was smooth and warm and went down easily, softening some of Reed's tension. He watched the girl over the rim of the glass. Maybe this was a come-on. Her black eyes watched him, still mocking, and he squirmed uncomfortably. Bored seduction didn't fit, somehow. He couldn't pin down her age. She was older than he had thought, but slender as a boy, without the slightest hint of sex. Twenty-five—about his age? The face fit, but that didn't feel right either.

"What kind of game are you playing?" The bourbon was loosening all kinds of knots in his brain, making him reckless. "Let's cut the fooling around. You know I broke in here." He glared into her young-old face.

"My name is Celila." She perched on the corner of the Formica table as if he hadn't spoken, swinging one foot with the deft, restless flick of a cat's tail. "Tell me what you're running from."

It was another command. Reed took a swallow of his drink and told her. He told her the whole damn, sad, stupid story about old-buddy Raymond and his kind offer of a job in his dental supply company when Reed was down on his luck. How dear Raymond went to bat with his partner over Reed's ineptitude and how the whole, damn roof fell in a month ago when the thirty grand turned up missing and Raymond pointed out his old friend with a pained, self-righteous face. He told her because he couldn't help it and because he wanted to tell *someone.*

"He set me up, the SOB." Reed closed his jaw so hard that the muscles in his face ached. "I did what he and the senior bookkeeper told me and didn't ask any questions and now, no one believes I could be that gullible. Little do they know." The laugh stuck in his throat. Plead guilty, his lawyer had said. If you're lucky, you'll get a year in minimum security.

No thanks. I'm not lucky. Reed tilted the glass until the ice cubes bumped his lip. He'd jumped bail and run, instead.

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"I want to kill Raymond," he said thickly and it was hotly, vividly true. He wanted to stab him, gut him, watch him bleed. The whiskey was soaking into Reed's empty stomach, making him dizzy.

"Revenge." Celila said it meditatively, with the tone of someone savoring a fine wine. "It's such a lovely, complex thing." Her tone became serious. "But there's *always* a price. Remember that." She lifted one white finger.

"You'd have to take an IOU," he said, and that seemed terribly funny. He felt drunk—too drunk for the amount of liquor he'd had. Time to get out of here. He got to his feet in the cramped space between bench and table, and as he wavered a little from the whiskey, she tilted her face up to him.

"IOUs are always acceptable," she said. Her dark brows curved into a speculative arch, and she leaned back lightly against his arm. The contact was electric—literally electric, as if her skin carried a static charge. Reed could almost feel his hair standing on end.

He'd been mistaken when he'd thought of her as a child. She was a woman, all right; sex rose from her skin like a rich, musky perfume. Reed swallowed, an erection pressing hard against his pants, his mouth dry with desire.

"Not yet." She placed one gloved palm lightly against his chest and he couldn't move. "I will give you your vengeance," she said. "I'll give you Raymond."

Reed stood still, sweating, frozen into stone by that pale hand. Her skin was actually white. Snow white. Bone white. She wasn't wearing gloves—you could see the delicate molding of muscle and tendon.

Makeup, he told himself. "For my IOU or my soul?" He laughed hoarsely, wanting to kiss her red mouth.

"I'm not your Christian devil." Her scornful laughter sounded like dissonant silver bells. "You can call me magic, if you want. I am . . . magic." She smiled at him.

Magic? He swallowed the dryness in his throat. "Yeah, sure." Her fingers held him motionless, cool as china, and he didn't laugh.

"That cop didn't like your looks at all, and he's on duty until midnight," she said. "He'll pick you up if you try to hitchhike into the city." Her tone carried the solid certainty of yesterday's news. "Stay here tonight . . . and I will give you revenge."

Hell, why not. Reed laughed breathlessly. Life was full of why nots right now. The whys had run out last week when he skipped bail.

She took his hand, and the touch sent lightning racing up his arm to explode in his brain. He wanted to grab her, wrap his arms around that slender white body. He wanted her, more than he could ever remember wanting a woman in his life.

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He didn't touch her. He wasn't sure he could. Magic? Reed laughed again, tasting whiskey on his breath. Dizzy and drunk, he let her lead him out of the trailer, past the tents and campers and into the fairground itself.

Blue twilight was deepening into darkness, and the fair was coming to life. Harried parents scurried after shrieking children, and pimply teenagers clutched the hands of plump girls who wore identical tank tops and had the same permed blonde hair. Weatherbeaten farmers lounged along the livestock barns. At one end of the fairground, the rodeo was getting underway beneath banks of big floodlights. The announcer's voice crackled unintelligibly, and the crowd roared.

Two girls trotted by on restless horses, dressed in sequined western costumes and black cowboy hats decorated with expensive silver. One of the horses snorted and skittered sideways, nearly swinging its thick haunches into Celila.

"You should be more careful," Celila said in a low, pleasant voice.

The rider tossed her a disdainful look and kicked her horse into a trot, showering them with clods of dirt. Celila smiled after her. Without warning, the chunky bay squealed and reared, bucking hard across the dirt track. The girl landed flat in the dust and the horse stepped on the silver-trimmed hat. Someone guffawed from the campground shadows, and the girl burst into tears.

"Magic, right?" Reed laced his fingers through Celila's cool, white ones.

"Yes." The small, red smile came and went. They had reached the long livestock barns; she spun lightly away from him, dancing through the crowd in the direction of the midway.

Reed laughed and stumbled after her, shouldering his way through the brightly dressed crowd. Magic? He wanted to believe in a magic that could dump a snotty brat into the dirt. He might have a lot of use for a magic like that. Strings of colored lights crisscrossed the midway and turned the Ferris wheel into a revolving wheel of color. Reed took a deep breath of grease, cotton candy, barbecuing chicken, and the sharp-woolly smell of animals. Dust filled the air. A mediocre singer sobbed out a country-western tale of heartbreak, carnies wheedled the credulous out of dimes and quarters, and a thousand voices shouted, laughed, and squealed. He trailed Celila down the midway.

"Three darts for a buck. Break one little balloon and win your girl a teddy bear." The skinny kid's adam's apple bobbed above his blue shirt. *American Carnivals* was embroidered on the pocket, and the fabric clung damply to his back. "Pretty thin crowd," the kid said to Celila. His eyes slid sideways to Reed's face and away again. "Marks are real tight with a buck."

"It'll get better, Kev." A tough, moon-faced woman called from the

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penny-pitch stand across the aisle. "Moon's full," she said, and shoved her hands into the canvas apron cinched around her thick waist. Coins jingled. "It'll pick up, won't it, Celila?" She looked at Reed, too, but, as he turned away, he could have sworn that she bent her knee to Celila in a stiff, fractional curtsey.

"They know me," Celila said to Reed, and showed him the tips of her teeth in a smile. Still holding his eyes, she tossed a casual hand. Silver dimes showered through the air, spinning, shedding light like falling stars. Each one landed in a glass dish on the thick woman's stand.

Onlookers *oohed* and Reed hurried after Celila. She seemed to leave a trail of light behind her, and it pulled him along, as if it were a string or an umbilicus anchored to his chest. He wasn't sure he could break it, even if he had wanted to, but he didn't *want* to break it. He didn't want to lose track of this strange carnival clown who promised magic and revenge and spun dimes through the air with impossible accuracy.

"Three shots for a buck—win your girl a teddy bear . . . pitch a dime, a thin dime takes home a glass—three rings on the bottle and you win . . ."

The crowd parted like water in front of Celila. Reed watched the carnies greet her from behind the scarred counters of their booths, interrupting their pitches. Some of them met her eyes and some of them didn't. Reed watched shoulders tilt and hunch, watched bored, wary faces shift and change as Celila approached, trying to pin down what it was that he saw. Respect. That was it. Respect and . . . fear.

"They know me." She breathed the words in his ear, and Reed jumped, because a moment ago, she had been halfway down the aisle, in front of the duck-pond game. "Open your eyes," she said. She waved her hand gracefully, and Reed looked around at the dusty crowds and the sneering carnies.

Suddenly, it *was* magic.

Crystal dishes glittered in the toss-a-coin booth, pandas and poodles smiled above the dart-boards. Their fur was pink and crimson velvet and their eyes were topaz and alive. Darts soared like flying fish above the crowd. The roller-coaster roared like a dragon as it leaped from its track, trailing fire and the thrilled screams of its riders.

Magic. Every booth, every strut in the ferris wheel, every face and arm and hand, all were outlined in clear light. Tired women moved like dancers, full of sex and energy, hair flowing, figures lush and inviting. Middle-aged men walked like athletes. Everyone was winning priceless treasure, riding dragons—drunk with sensuality. Bills, children, and next month's rent were forgotten. This was a magic night, and there was no morning. Reed looked around at the wide-eyed faces. These people

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believed. Right here, in this place, in this *now,* everything was bright and beautiful and real.

"Now, you see." Celila's fingers brushed his cheek, light as moth wings. "Tonight, they belong to *me.*" She held out her hand, lips curved in a feral smile.

Six eggs lay in her palm, dyed purple and pink and green, like Easter eggs. Before Reed could speak, she began to juggle. She tossed the eggs lightly into the air, slowly at first, then faster and faster, until they blurred into a hoop of woven color. The bright ring made Reed dizzy, and the air wavered like heat waves above an August highway.

The midway crowd murmured and closed in around them. Reed could feel their belief. It flowed through the crowd like electricity. Housewives, carpenters, adolescents in punked hair and black leather—Celila was right—they belonged to her.

Belief is power, Reed thought, and shivered.

Celila smiled down at him. She was growing, expanding until she stood straddle-legged above the midway, holding a hoop of burning color in her hands. Darkness filled the space bounded by the whirling eggs, expanding to swallow Celila, the roller-coaster, and the crowded fairground.

Sparks danced in the darkness, became flickering torchlight illuminating the rough stone wall of a cave. A pig grunted on a stone altar. Women surrounded it, dressed in long, earth-colored robes, their faces solemn and full of shadow. They were chanting. The hair on the back of Reed's neck prickled as one of the women stepped forward. She lifted a gleaming blade, cut the pig's throat with one swift stroke. Red blood spurted out across the old, stained stone, and the woman's hood fell back.

Reed stared into Celila's pale, burning face. "Who are you?" he whispered. He could feel the pig's blood on his face, and his heart began to pound in a slow, fierce rhythm. There was power in death.

Celila's black eyes glittered, and the cave vanished. She was a slender carny clown again, tossing eggs beneath the hot midway lights. Stars were caught in her hair. Solemnly, she tossed the eggs to him, one, two, three.

Reed caught them. She had offered, he had accepted. He threw his head back and tossed the eggs high into the air. What the hell! Drunk and exulting, he spun the fragile shells up and over, shaping a second hoop of pink-blue-green-yellow in the air.

Power shivered in the air between them.

"I believe." He looked Celila in the eye, shaping the power with her, strong and careless as a god. "I believe in your magic," he said. "And I want my revenge—*now.*" He felt light and joyous, hollow as an old bone with the wind whistling through it. You're *mine,* Raymond, you poor son of a bitch! Celila laughed like silver bells, and Reed threw the eggs into

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the sky, one after another. They disappeared, streaking across the sky like pastel comets.

"Sherri, honey, I've had it. Let's call it a day." The voice was as clear as if someone had spoken in Reed's ear.

Raymond's voice. The bustle of cotton-shirted backs and the sound of chanting carnies solidified around Reed once more. He stood still, his skin twitching hot and cold and hot again. It *was* Raymond, dressed with his usual casual elegance, one arm around a golden-skinned woman in a white sundress. His hair was fluffed and sprayed to hide the thin spot, and he carried a plush, pink poodle under one arm.

"I've seen enough animals for an ark," Raymond was complaining in his mellow voice. "Let's run back to the house and watch the stars." The woman said something in a sweet, teasing voice, and Raymond laughed.

Reed remembered that laugh. It was the one good old Ray always used to coax Reed into doing something for him. My God, what a fool he'd been! Reed's skin was cold again, sizzling with energy, like Celila's had been in the camper. He began to slide through the crowd, moving easily as a shark, his hands full of power.

This is what it was all about. Celila was wrong to call it magic. Magic was tricks with handkerchiefs and flowers. *This* was something dark and powerful and very, very old. Reed smiled slowly. Not all the laws in the world can save you now, Raymond. This time, *you're* going to pay. Raymond and his girlfriend were a long way ahead, walking toward the gate to the parking lot out behind the animal barns. No rush. They weren't going to get away from him, not this time, not tonight. He sauntered.

Reed caught up with them near the concrete pad of the wash rack, where farm kids scrubbed down their prize cattle. A big white bull was tied to the rack, chewing placidly.

"Taking a little vacation, Raymond?" Reed's voice was smooth as a steel knife blade. "Enjoying the thirty grand you took in trade for my life?"

Raymond jerked around. "Reed? What are *you* doing here?" His face looked sallow in the yellow light. "You've got things all wrong," he said nervously. The woman in the white sundress was looking from Raymond to Reed, frowning. She had a perfect figure and shoulder-length blonde hair.

"I bet," Reed said, and leered at the woman. "Did you buy *her* with the thirty grand?" he asked. "It's time to pay up, Ray."

For a minute, Reed thought Raymond was going to bluff or yell for help, but instead, he dropped the woman's arm and bolted.

The ancient darkness stirred inside Reed and he lifted his hand languidly. Too late, Raymond. He was powerful, and Raymond was nothing.

The bull bellowed.

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It sounded like a lion's roar. The sounds of the fair faded as the creature snapped its lead rope with a casual toss of its huge head. It trotted away from the rack, and cut Raymond off neatly as he jogged toward the gate. The woman shrieked and ran, stumbling across the graveled lot toward the barn. Going for help? It wouldn't matter.

Reed smiled as the bull lowered its head in front of Raymond. The short, curved horns gleamed wickedly. Raymond made a wordless, gobbling sound as he backed away. His back hit the chain-link fence that edged the fairgrounds, and he stood there, arms spread like a cheap crucifix.

My bull. My demon. Reed's lips curved. The light and bustle had formed a distant blur of noise and light around them, as if Raymond, the bull, and Reed were all in the eye of an invisible hurricane. Revenge for an IOU. Reed laughed out loud, and the dark power moved in his belly.

His laugh tilted the world, and suddenly, he was looking *up* at Raymond's slack, frightened face. He laughed again, and it emerged as the breathy roar of an angry bull. Reed felt a rush of exultation, hot and pleasurable as orgasm. I *am* the bull, Raymond. He bellowed again. I am your death.

He flexed his neck, felt muscles ripple and bunch. Power. Hot, animal power. It felt good. Delicately, he drew a single line in the dust with the tip of his horn. It gleamed like old bone, like Celila's hands. Hot breath rushed in and out of his nostrils, and his haunches quivered. Raymond moaned, and broke from the fence in a stumbling rush.

Reed let him run a few paces, then headed him off in a storm of thundering hooves. He herded Raymond casually, shaking his beautiful, deadly horns, teasing him, playing with him. *He* was in control this time. He was the cat, and poor, pitiful Raymond was the mouse.

He was going to kill the mouse.

Reed heard laughter like silver bells as his cloven hoofs pounded the ground. Strength rippled under his skin. Revenge. He savored it. Power.

Raymond stumbled, slipped, and collapsed onto his hands and knees in the slick, black mud by the wash rack. Reed trotted lightly around to face him. *Now,* Raymond. He touched Raymond's throat with one horn tip and their eyes locked. He willed Raymond to see him—good old Ray had to *know.*

"Reed?" Eyes wide and mad, Raymond stared up at him. He was panting, and sweat stuck his hair into tufts, exposing glossy scalp. "Please, Reed! I didn't want to do it."

Yeah, sure. Delicately, Reed dug the horn in a little deeper.

Raymond flinched, choked. "I was afraid," he gasped out. "A coward. I couldn't stand it—disgrace, newspaper stories . . . people whispering. *Prison.*" He was shaking, now. "I couldn't take prison, and I knew they'd

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be easier on an employee." His face crumpled and he began to cry. "Please. Oh God, Reed, please don't."

Reed twisted the horn a little, but rage was dissolving into slimy disgust. He tensed, fighting to hold onto his anger. *Do* it, he told himself fiercely. Don't let the bastard con you. He used you, set you up for prison. He felt Celila's cold, implacable stare.

Do it.

Celila wanted blood; he could feel her lust, rank and hot as the bull's breath. Dip the horn tip, jab through the muscle over the belly, and toss your head *so*. In his mind, he knew how it would be. The skin and muscle would tear, spilling twisting ropes of purple and gray guts that would steam in the cooling evening air. Raymond would scream and bleed and die, like the pig on the altar.

He deserved it.

In the mud at his feet, Raymond whimpered and cowered.

On the far side of the wash rack, Celila laughed like silver bells again, and it sounded like Raymond's laugh. She had given him Raymond.

Everything has a price, she had said.

I didn't ask what it *was*. Reed closed his eyes, and Celila's white face blurred into Raymond's twisted features against the screen of his eyelids.

Raymond had wanted money.

Celila wanted blood.

"Wait," Reed whispered. "Not again." His thoughts tangled in confusion, and his head hurt. The ground tilted out from under him.

He was on his hands and knees in the mud by the wash rack. Raymond stumbled toward him, muddy and terrified. Behind him trotted the bull. Celila tossed color in the shadows, her face like ice, and Raymond wasn't going to make it. Reed scrambled to his feet, his head full of blood and steaming purple guts and the memory of bull muscles.

The price?

"Run, you idiot!" Reed grabbed Raymond's outstretched arm, yanking him sideways at the last moment. The smooth white horn slid past Raymond's back with an inch to spare. Clods of mud spattered Reed as the bull slewed around, and Reed slung Raymond toward a tractor parked near the fence.

"Climb on it. Move!" Reed's voice cracked and he shoved Raymond hard, nearly throwing the heavier man onto the safety of the tractor.

The horn caught Reed as he scrambled after Raymond. The impact knocked him off his feet, and he hit the dry ground hard, rolling himself into a ball, flinching away from the deadly hooves.

Miraculously, the bull leaped over him, and the hooves thudded away into the distance. Reed lay still, trying to breathe slowly and carefully, wondering if he was dying. Dying for *Raymond*. What a joke. His side

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burned like fire, and he winced, his breath catching, as he moved his right arm. It didn't feel like he was dying. You owe me, Raymond. Anger dulled the pain, and he struggled to his feet, clutching the thick tread of the tractor tire with his good hand.

The bull had vanished, and so had Raymond. Reed stared around the dusty quadrangle, searching the thinning crowd. Raymond couldn't have made it to the barn. Raymond couldn't have been here in the *first* place, at a two-bit county fair in the middle of nowhere! Reed began to laugh, softly.

Celila walked lightly toward him, tossing colored eggs casually in one hand.

Reed wiped his muddy palm on his pants and leaned against the tractor. "Was he real?" His knees wanted to shake. "Was Raymond real?"

"Yes." The bright, black eyes regarded him. "And no. It was *your* choice."

"My choice?" He winced as she reached out and unbuttoned his shirt with her white fingers. "He would have been real if I'd killed him, wouldn't he?" And then what?

They were gathering at the edge of the quadrangle—the carny folk. He caught a glimpse of the moon-faced woman and the skinny kid. They were looking at him, watching him with hungry faces.

He shivered and looked down at his bare chest. The bull's horn had plowed a long, shallow graze across his ribs. Not bad, but it hurt. Blood welled out of the shallow trough and Celila ran her cupped hand along the gash. Her fingers were cold as ice, and the blood pooled in her palm, thick and shiny as mercury. She smiled at him and lifted her hand to her lips. Slowly, she licked her fingers.

Reed stared at her, sick and numb. "Who are you?" he whispered. "What are you?"

"I am everything," she said. "Beginning, middle, and end." Her voice was the creaking mumble of an old, old woman and her eyes were black pebbles. "Mother, maiden, and crone."

She was old . . . she was old. Reed had to look away from those black pebble eyes. He buttoned his shirt again, fumbling one-handed with the buttons. The gash had stopped bleeding and the skin felt numb and stiff where she had touched it. He turned away from her, stumbling down the midway to the main gate, shoving his way through the sluggish crowd.

Celila walked beside him, and, one by one, the carny people fell in behind, trailing them through the emptying fairground. Reed's shoulders kept wanting to hunch, and the walk to the main gate was a hundred miles long.

All around him, the fair lived and moved, a kaleidoscope of light and

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color and humanity. Belief scented the air, and he could feel the power there, bright and beautiful, dark and ugly, tainted with old, dark blood.

What happened to the old gods who demanded blood and fear? Who sacrificed for them, now?

He walked faster.

The bored security guard at the gate barely glanced at him. Tired families stumbled past, trailing a wake of crumpled paper cups, cotton candy cones, and corn-dog sticks. Celila stopped just inside the gate. Reed walked a step or two beyond, and then turned to face her. He could see the asphalt highway at the end of the long gravel driveway.

This is where I started, he thought. He stared at the black lanes. The asphalt looked wet in the glare of headlights and it was about two million miles to the city, even if a cop didn't pick him up. A hell of a long way. I could call my lawyer—ask him what it'll cost me if I turn myself in. A year in prison, if he was lucky? Two, or three, or five, if he wasn't.

He felt very, very tired. Color and light tugged at him, tugging him back toward the carnival. Power. He remembered the hot, sweet feel of it.

"You *wanted* me to kill Raymond," he said. "It was a trick."

That wasn't quite true. Reed had wanted to kill Raymond, too. Somewhere, deep down, he *still* wanted to kill him.

"You can still choose." Celila lifted a bone-white hand, and, behind her, the carny folk murmured. "The power will belong to you and you will belong to the power," she said. "Forever."

The chilly breeze flicked her bangs and swayed her slim, sexless body. Sixteen? Twenty-five? The eyes in her smooth face were holes into a darkness that made Reed think of tombs, of ancient dust, of pyramids. Old. *Ancient.* He shivered, thinking of old stones and thick red blood . . . and sacrifice.

Gods need worshippers.

"What did you get for *your* price?" Reed raised his voice, shouted at the little knot of shadowy figures inside the gate. The security guard at the gate glanced at him warily, but no one answered.

Celila's ancient eyes looked into him and through him. "You'll spend three years in prison," she said. "They will not be pleasant." She reached for his hand, and slipped something round and hard onto his palm.

An egg. Reed stared at the fragile, blue shell. He could feel the chick inside, fluttering and peeping faintly.

Prison. Three years in prison. And after? What then? Just more assholes, pushing him around, for the rest of his life. A loser's life. Celila stood just inside the fairground gate, not one inch of her body beyond the chainlink boundary.

She had offered him forever.

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Reed stared at the egg on his palm. It was hot, so hot it nearly burned his hand. Toss it into the air, he thought. Take the power in both hands and accept it. Don't let the assholes win. The carny folk clustered behind her, and their hungry eyes burned like cold flames.

There are prisons and prisons.

The ancient, tomb eyes waited with the patience of a stone. The power belongs to you and you belong to the power. Light and color and eternity waited for him on the midway.

The chick peeped faintly inside its shell.

Very, very gently, Reed cracked the shell and the wet, blue chick scrabbled in his palm, its down drying slowly in the night breeze. Celila watched it without speaking. Reed searched her face, looking for anger or hope or disappointment, but the pale features might as well have been a fine porcelain mask.

"No," he said. He put the chick gently down onto the dusty ground, and straightened stiffly. "I'm tired of paying someone else's price," he said, to the unblinking stone eyes.

He turned his back. The chick's shrill peeping followed him as he walked back out to the highway.

This time, he'd try paying his own. ●

NEAT STUFF

(Continued from page 16)

original script. Volk wrote *The Kiss* and Ken Russell's *Gothic*. "This is a realistic film about inexplicable things," Friedkin said. "I'd call it a suspense horror film along the lines of a Brothers Grimm story . . . but with a realistic foundation."

The director's first hit, *The French Connection* (1971), won the Academy Award for Best Picture. And his most recent film was the stylish crime thriller, *To Live and Die in L.A.* (1985). But he is a self-proclaimed admirer of classic horror films like *Rosemary's Baby* and *Alien*.

And though there are plenty of special effects in *The Guardian*, Friedkin sees this as a film about characters that we believe in. "What I liked about the original script of this film is that it dealt with a basic primal fear by centering on a family and what happens when that is threatened."

It was producer Joe Wizan who approached the director with Volk's original script last year. "What Billy Friedkin has here is a story that is ultimately about who you entrust your children to."

(Continued on page 117)

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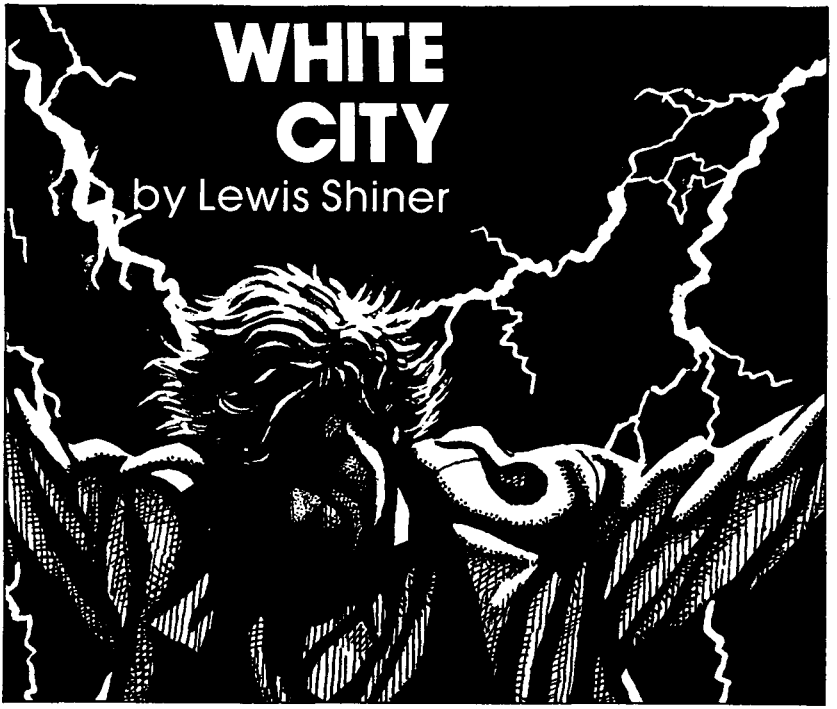

art: Janet Aulisio

A number of projects have consumed Lewis Shiner's attention since we last published one of his tales ("Six Flags Over Jesus," which was written in collaboration with his wife, Edith Shiner, and appeared in our November 1987 issue). He's written stories for Joe Lansdale's anthology *Razored Saddles*, Ellen Datlow's *Alien Sex* anthology, and Bantam Books' *Wild Cards* series. He has co-authored an eight-issue limited series for DC Comics called *Time Masters*, and he's written *Slam*, a skateboarding novel that will be published by Doubleday in July. Mr. Shiner has also managed to find the time to edit a Greenpeace benefit anthology, *When the Music's Over*, that Bantam will release some time this year.

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Tesla lifts the piece of sirloin to his lips. Its volume is approximately .25 cubic inches, or .02777 of the entire steak. As he chews, he notices a waterspot on the back of his fork. He takes a fresh napkin from the stack at his left elbow and scrubs the fork vigorously.

He is sitting at a private table in the refreshment stand at the West end of the Court of Honor. He looks out onto the Chicago World's Fair and Columbian Exposition. It is October of 1893. The sun is long gone and the reflections of Tesla's electric lights sparkle on the surface of the Main Basin, turning the spray from the fountain into glittering jewels. At the far end of the Basin stands the olive-wreathed Statue of the Republic in flowing robes. On all sides the White City lies in pristine elegance, testimony to the glorious architecture of ancient Greece and Rome. Its chilly streets are populated by mustached men in topcoats and sturdy women in woolen shawls.

The time is 9:45. At midnight Nikola Tesla will produce his greatest miracle. The number twelve seems auspicious. It is important to him, for reasons he cannot understand, that it is divisible by three.

Anne Morgan, daughter of financier J. Pierpont Morgan, stands at a little distance from his table. Though still in finishing school she is tall, self-possessed, strikingly attractive. She is reluctant to disturb Tesla, knowing he prefers to dine alone. Still she is drawn to him irresistibly. He is rake thin and handsome as the devil himself, with steel gray eyes that piece through to her soul.

"Mr. Tesla," she says, "I pray I am not disturbing you."

Tesla looks up, smiles gently. "Miss Morgan." He begins to rise.

"Please, do not get up. I was merely afraid I would miss you. I had hoped we might walk together after you finished here."

"I would be delighted."

"I shall await you there, by the Basin."

She withdraws. Trailing a gloved hand along the balustrade, she tries to avoid the drunken crowds which swarm the Exposition Grounds. Tomorrow the Fair will close and pass into history. Already there are arguments as to what is to become of these splendid buildings. There is neither money to maintain them nor desire to demolish them. Chicago's Mayor, Carter Harrison, worries that they will end up filthy and vandalized, providing shelter for the hundreds of poor who will no longer have jobs when the Fair ends.

Her thoughts turn back to Tesla. She finds herself inordinately taken with him. At least part of the attraction is the mystery of his personal life. At age thirty-seven he has never married nor been engaged. She has heard rumors that his tastes might be, to put it delicately, Greek in nature. There is no evidence to support this gossip and she does not credit

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it. Rather it seems likely that no one has yet been willing to indulge the inventor's many idiosyncrasies.

She absently touches her bare left earlobe. She no longer wears the pearl earrings that so offended him on their first meeting. She flushes at the memory, and at that point Tesla appears.

"Shall we walk?" he asks.

She nods and matches his stride, careful not to take his arm. Tesla is not comfortable with personal contact.

To their left is the Hall of Agriculture. She has heard that its most popular attraction is an eleven-ton cheese from Ontario. Like so many other visitors to the Fair, she has not actually visited any of the exhibits. They seem pedestrian compared to the purity and classical lines of the buildings which house them. The fragrance of fresh roses drifts out through the open doors, and for a moment she is lost in a reverie of her native New York in the spring.

As they pass the end of the hall they are in darkness for a few moments. Tesla seems to shudder. He has been silent and intent, as if compulsively counting his steps. It would not surprise her if this were actually the case.

"Is anything wrong?" she asks.

"No," Tesla says. "It's nothing."

In fact the darkness is full of lurking nightmares for Tesla. Just now he was five years old again, watching his older brother Daniel fall to his death. Years of guilty self-examination have not made the scene clearer. They stood together at the top of the cellar stairs, and then Daniel fell into the darkness. Did he fall? Did Nikola, in a moment of childish rage, push him?

All his life he has feared the dark. His father took his candles away, so little Nikola made his own. Now the full-grown Tesla has brought electric light to the White City, carried by safe, inexpensive alternating current. It is only the beginning.

They round the East end of the Court of Honor. At the Music Hall, the Imperial Band of Austria plays melodies from Wagner. Anne Morgan shivers in the evening chill. "Look at the moon," she says. "Isn't it romantic?"

Tesla's smile seems condescending. "I have never understood the romantic impulse. We humans are meat machines, and nothing more."

"That is hardly a pleasant image."

"I do not mean to be offensive, only accurate. That is the aim of science, after all."

"Yes, of course," Anne Morgan says. "Science." There seems no way to reach him, no chink in his cool exterior. This is where the others gave up, she thinks. I will prove stronger than all of them. In her short,

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privileged existence, she has always obtained what she wants. "I wish I knew more about it."

"Science is a pure, white light," Tesla says. "It shines evenly on all things, and reveals their particular truths. It banishes uncertainty, and opinion, and contradiction. Through it we master the world."

They have circled back to the West, and to their right is the Liberal Arts Building. She has heard that it contains so much painting and sculpture that one can only wander helplessly through it. To attempt to seek out a single artist, or to look for the French Impressionists, of whom she has been hearing so much, would be sheer futility.

Under Tesla's electric lights, the polished facade of the building sparkles. For a moment, looking down the impossibly long line of perfect Corinthian columns, she feels what Tesla feels: the triumph of man over nature, the will to conquer and shape and control. Then the night breeze brings her the scent of roses from across the Basin and the feeling passes.

They enter the Electricity Building together and stand in the center, underneath the great dome. This is the site of the Westinghouse exhibit, a huge curtained archway resting upon a metal platform. Beyond the arch are two huge Tesla coils, the largest ever built. At the peak of the arch is a tablet inscribed with the words: WESTINGHOUSE ELECTRIC & MANUFACTURING CO. /TESLA POLYPHASE SYSTEM.

Tesla's mood is triumphant. Edison, his chief rival, has been proven wrong. Alternating current will be the choice of the future. The Westinghouse Company has this week been awarded the contract to build the first two generators at Niagara Falls. Tesla cannot forgive Edison's hiring of Menlo Park street urchins to kidnap pets, which he then electrocuted with alternating current—"Westinghoused" them, as he called it. But Edison's petty, lunatic attempts to discredit the polyphase system have failed, and he stands revealed as an old, bitter, and unimaginative man.

Edison has lost, and history will soon forget him.

George Westinghouse himself, Tesla's patron, is here tonight. So are J.P. Morgan, Anne's father, and William K. Vanderbilt and Mayor Harrison. Here also are Tesla's friends Robert and Katherine Johnson, and Samuel Clemens, who insists everyone call him by his pen name.

It is nearly midnight.

Tesla steps lightly onto the platform. He snaps his fingers and gas-filled tubes burst into pure white light. Tesla has fashioned them to spell out the names of several of the celebrities present, as well as the names of his favorite Serbian poets. He holds up his hands to the awed and expectant crowd. "Gentlemen and Ladies. I have no wish to bore you

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with speeches. I have asked you here to witness a demonstration of the power of electricity."

He continues to talk, his voice rising to a high pitch in his excitement. He produces several wireless lamps and places them around the stage. He points out that their illumination is undiminished, despite their distance from the broadcast power source. "Note how the gas at low pressure exhibits extremely high conductivity. This gas is little different from that in the upper reaches of our atmosphere."

He concludes with a few fireballs and pinwheels of light. As the applause gradually subsides he holds up his hands once again. "These are little more than parlor tricks. Tonight I wish to say thank you, in a dramatic and visible way, to all of you who have supported me through your patronage, through your kindness, through your friendship. This is my gift to you, and to all of mankind."

He opens a panel in the front of the arch. A massive knife switch is revealed. Tesla makes a short bow and then throws the switch.

The air crackles with ozone. Electricity roars through Tesla's body. His hair stands on end and flames dance at the tips of his fingers. Electricity is his God, his best friend, his only lover. It is clean, pure, absolute. It arcs through him and invisibly into the sky. Tesla alone can see it. To him it is blinding white, the color he sees when inspiration, fear, or elation strikes him.

The coils draw colossal amounts of power. All across the great hall, all over the White City, lights flicker and dim. Anne Morgan cries out in shock and fear.

Through the vaulted windows overhead the sky itself begins to glow.

Something sparks and hisses and the machine winds down. The air reeks of melted copper and glass and rubber. It makes no difference. The miracle is complete.

Tesla steps down from the platform. His friends edge away from him, involuntarily. Tesla smiles like a wise father. "If you will follow me, I will show you what man has wrought."

Already there are screams from outside. Tesla walks quickly to the doors and throws them open.

Anne Morgan is one of the first to follow him out. She cannot help but fear him, despite her attraction, despite all her best intentions. All around her she sees fairgoers with their necks craned upward, or their eyes hidden in fear. She turns her own gaze to the heavens and lets out a short, startled cry.

The sky is on fire. Or rather, it burns the way the filaments burn in one of Tesla's electric lamps. It has become a sheet of glowing white. After a few seconds the glare hurts her eyes and she must look away.

It is midnight, and the Court of Honor is lit as if by the noonday sun.

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She is close enough to hear Tesla speak a single, whispered word: "Magnificent."

Westinghouse comes forward nervously. "This is quite spectacular," he says, "but hadn't you best, er, turn it off?"

Tesla shakes his head. Pride shines from his face. "You do not seem to understand. The atmosphere itself, some 35,000 feet up, has become an electrical conductor. I call it my 'terrestrial night light.' The charge is permanent. I have banished night from the world for all time."

"For all time?" Westinghouse stammers.

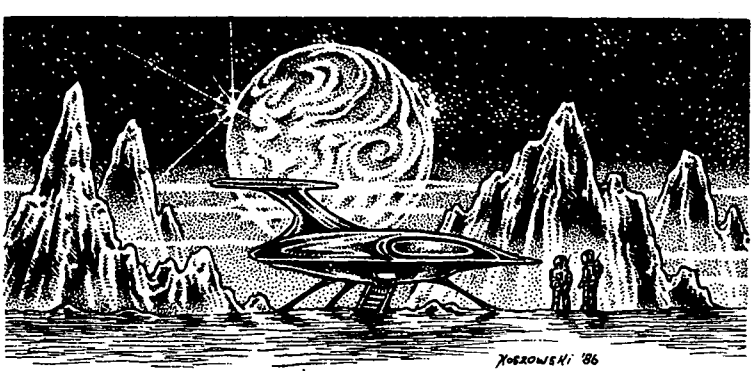
Anne Morgan slumps against a column, feels the cold marble against her back. Night, banished? The stars, gone forever? "You're mad," she says to Tesla. "What have you done?"

Tesla turns away. The reaction is not what he expected. Where is their gratitude? He has turned their entire world into a White City, a city in which crime and fear and nightmares are no longer possible. Yet men point at him, shouting curses, and women weep openly.

He pushes past them, toward the train station. Meat machines, he thinks. They are so used to their inefficient cycles of night and day. But they will learn.

He boards a train for New York and secures a private compartment. As he drives on into the white night, his window remains brilliantly lighted.

In the light there is truth. In the light there is peace. In the light he will be able, at last, to sleep. ●



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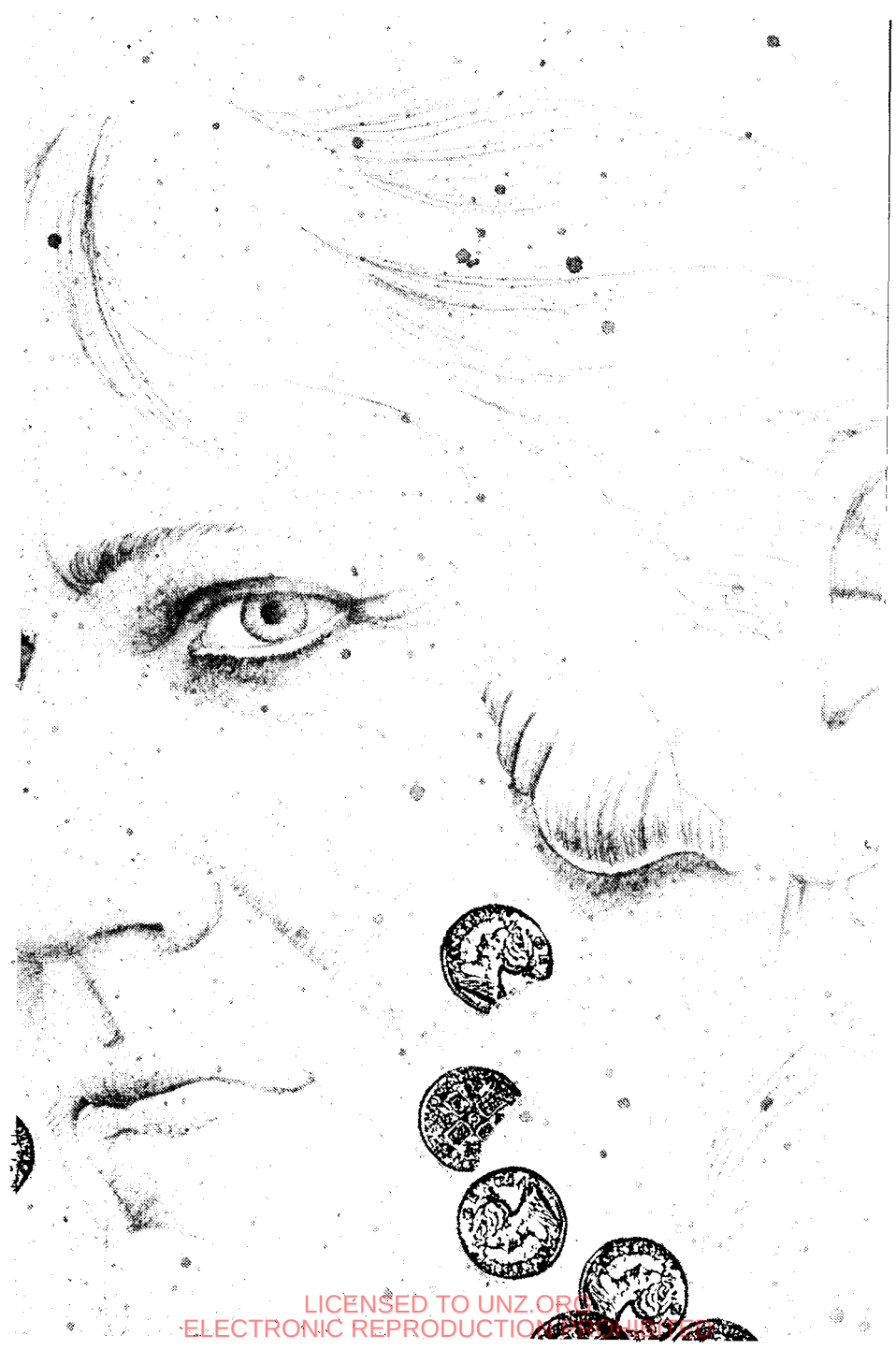

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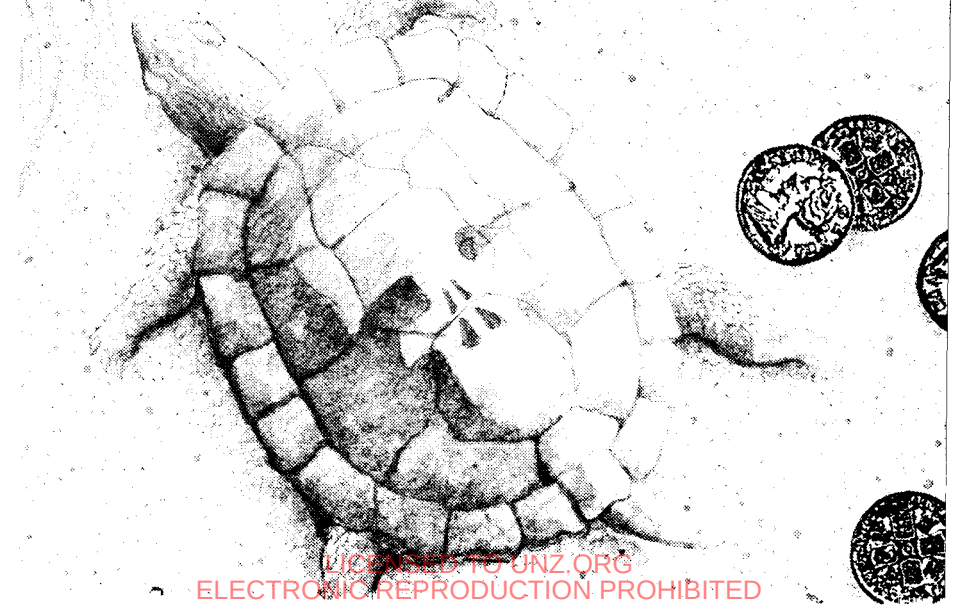
Night . . . and not plenilune, either, you can bet your boots. Limekiller has *no* boots, he has, though, a shovel. Limekiller feels that if he eats another pannikin of rice and beans or of the thin chowder called fish-*tea* that he . . . that he. . . . What he is after, he is after turtle-eggs, so significant a source of insult in the rich, *rich* Chinese culture, largely represented in British Hidalgo by the canny and philoprogenitive merchant Aurelio Aung and about 327 of his descendants. Better be exceedingly careful in talking about turtles to the Aung. More better say as little as possible about eggs at all to any of them. To ask, even to ask, "Don Aurelio, do you think it's going to rain?" would bring conversation to a

LIMEKILLER AT LARGE

by Avram Davidson

Here is the tale of a curious happening upon the shore of distant British Hidalgo . . .

art: George Thompson



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sudden and deathly-still halt. As for that sole man ever known to have placed his hand on the ancient and naked head of old Aurelio Aung (for what reason, knows only God), death did not exactly come on swift wings, but it is certain that Aurelio Aung III felled him with a kick he had learned before kung fu became well-known in the regions of the dark west, and that Aurelio Aung, Jr. had assisted III to propel the man down a flight of steps at the bottoms of which a throng or tong of unnumbered Aung were waiting to and did kick him with many sharp kicks of their sharp-pointed shoes (they being fashionable, and Old Aung had imported them and sold them in considerable numbers) before P.C. Oscar Spencer C. Featherstonehaugh Smith, then on duty, had finished strolling over quite leisurely. It may not have been a capital offense "to kill a Chinaman" in Pecos, Texas during the incumbency of Judge Roy Bean; but it was quite a serious offense to insult Aurelio Aung in King Town, the ancient and moldering capital—as the man commonly called Bloody Whoop-whoop, a citizen of a Commonwealth Country (*not,* thank God, Canada!) soon found out. For not only was he subsequently refused service at hotels, bars, and brothels, but within no less than eighty-seven hours had been declared an Inadmissible Person ("in that he did disturb the peace of Her Majesty's Realm in British Hidalgo in a state of drunkenness by shouting 'Delete the Queen and all those other damn Dutch delete,' and did assault one Aurelio Aung Senior a loyal subject of Her Majesty," etc. etc. for several other charges: of which others he had indeed been guilty but otherwise nothing more than a tolerant smile would have come of them); and was propelled by the pink palms of no less than three police sergeants across the Spanish-speaking border of a neighboring Republic. Which was the end of that. Though the pelicans and the hedgehogs may have picked his bones, and the satyrs danced upon them; serve him right.

For, over the course of many, *many* years, as John Lutwidge (Jack) Limekiller had learned, as follows: the turtle, having a shell cannot copulate with other turtles and hence has conjugal union with a snake and is therefore (the turtle) written with the Chinese character meaning *Forgets Filial Piety;* by touching with one's palm the shell of the turtle one can tell if it is going to rain or not (Jack did not learn exactly *how,* and very much forebore to ask): therefore to imply that some one is a turtle or a turtle's egg is to insinuate several ugly matrimonial skeletons in some one's family closet . . . or sandalwood chest. *Oh* dear.

And as for the flexible yet muscular neck-and-head of the turtle, extendable and retractable, references to and comparison with any particular member peculiar to the male anatomy are surely so obvious that only a turtle—But enough. The Aung family was clever. It was cognitive. It was commercial. It would do business in almost anything from gal-

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banum to guppies. But it would not do business with turtles. And it would certainly not do business with turtles' eggs. Indeed as a general thing it would not admit knowing that turtles *had* eggs.

This left the local turtle-egg-hunting field narrowed down to only the Bayfolk, the Black Arawack, the White Creoles, and the Brown Panyars. All of whom admired the Aung family tre*men*dously.

But did not share their prejudices.

At all.

But Smith-Piggott cared for none of these things.

Augustus Smith-Piggott, Permanent Undersecretary to Government, was a fixture. Legislatures, Governors, Cabinet Ministers, came and went: Smith-Piggott alone remained. His laccolithic face was in itself a monument to Empire; indeed, he was a one-man proverb all in his own right, to wit, "You no say *'No'* to Smeet-*Pee*gott!" And on the day when he had decided that the turtles of the deeps (and perhaps even the shallows) might be endangered, the fate of legal hunting of their eggs was sealed.

Suppose that you were a young man, of full age, and although in very good health, felt that you had admired the Canadian snowscape fully as much as Kipling had, and now desired to copy Kipling in another manner, and survey the warmer souths: you, too (provided that your passport was in good order and that you were not on one of those *Wanted for Extradition* information sheets which circulate, sunset or not, throughout what used to be the British Empire): you might also have found yourself considering coconuts in place of maple leaves; Dr. Benjamin Jowett *(My name it is Benjamin Jowett/ Whatever is knowledge I know it/ I'm the Provost of Trinity College/ And what I do not know is not knowledge.),* in a bit of a snit, had once observed that there were more sun-worshippers than Anglicans in Her Majesty's dominions; and perhaps there still are.

All of which is beside the point at issue or where is it at, the point being (a) that Limekiller was hungry, and that it was Inhibited "to trap, dredge, catch, dig, trench, or otherwise secure the eggs of the great sea-turtle, the lesser-sea-turtle, the green or the hawksbill turtle, or any other turtle, tortoise, hiccatee, or bocatura whatsoever from any point upon or within one league of the seacoast of Her Majesty's Colony of British Hidalgo during such months which may be gazetted for purposes of said Inhibitions and all persons who may contravene such inhibitions shall be given into custody . . . to serve at hard labour at Her Majesty's pleasure for not more than one year and one day, etc."—it being damned well-understood in common-law and chancery that you might, if the

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Crown wanted it, serve every single day of such sentence for every single egg they caught you with.

Limekiller was *very* hungry?

He was.

Otherwise catch *him* at the wane of the moon with very little light save that supplied by the phosphorescent wash of the waves and the great and glittering stars clad only in shirt and britches (it was his bad shirt, too, for his good one had been just washed and hung drying from some ratlines or something on his boat *Sacarissa*) and with a shovel. Limekiller did indeed appreciate the need for keeping the sea-turtle or whatever was its particular name (Sadie? Lou? Jane?) from being egg-hunted to extinction; he also appreciated that its newly-surfaced hatchlings en route to the Stream of Ocean (just open Homer at random. . . . "Agamemnon shook his great purple cloak and with a great cry [or, loudly breaking wind], spake these winged words, 'Out upon thee, thou caitiff dog, and get thee gone from the camps of the well-greaved Aechaeans [or, pos. the Greeks with swollen legs], ne'er taking breath till thou reach the Stream of Ocean, and take care thou offend not the Turtle-eaters dwelling thereby, whom Apollo and Poseidon delight twice a year to visit. . . .'" *See?*) the newly-hatched and tiny turtles on route from their nests to the water were swooped down upon and eaten by predators innumerable, and he hoped that the dozen or so eggs he might take never would be missed; though perhaps in all this he was Wrong. And if he were asked *why,* nevertheless, he was doing so, he might answer, as did a well-known vegetarian found eating a steak, "I was hungry."

Aurelio Aung *y compañía* might extend credit once, he/they might (though less likely) extend credit twice, but after that appeals for credit would only send him/them back to the abacus. Hence see Limekiller, his boat moored up a creek by the mangroves brown, pacing the beach under cover of night. And what would George II have thought about it all?

Neither history nor poetry had been very kind to George III. One poet has perhaps summed it up:

George Third
Ought never to have occurred.
Such a blunder
Makes one wonder.

Deft, no? Eh?

Of George I, we retain dull memories that he, not being able to speak English, thus became the first British Sovereign not to attend cabinet meetings, to the great advantage of Constitutional Government. But of George *II*—well, what *of* George II? The answer must only be: nothing. Nothing much in England, nothing good in Scotland, nothing much good

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in Ireland, and certainly nothing at all in British Columbia. But in British Hidalgo: a great deal more than nothing: for when it came to the second George's attention that the Spanish Viceroy of Mexico or perhaps Peru (history is a little blurry as to this) was caught out in sketching plans to invade the sea-coast of British Hidalgo (which was, in those days, almost all sea-coast), did not George II declare that, if this were done, "He vould, py Got, pompard der coasts of Shpain!"? This has been forgotten in Britain (it has probably been forgotten in Spain, both nations having had very long and very bad headaches from their respective and very disrespectful empires); it has never been forgotten in British Hidalgo; "the Spaniard"—as he is always called, collectively—having foreborne to make the planned invasion.

To this day, in fact, in Woodcutters Cove, that forgotten last refuge of the White Creoles, there is still a statue of this bristly little monarch. True, it is only half life-size, and the sculptor has pictured him wearing the armor and tunic of a Roman general, with the result that there is a subversive school of thought which maintains stubbornly that it is a statue of Queen Victoria in corset and petticoat. But that is neither here nor there; and, alas, increasingly, that is where one nowadays mostly finds the White Creoles of the Colony, to wit: neither here nor there . . . the principal exception being, of course, Woodcutters Cove. Darker and more vigorous races have in large part taken over, elsewhere. The children of Asia (of both ends and of the middle) run most of the shops. The civil service and police constabulary are mostly Bayfolk (which is to say, mostly Black or Tan). Most of the farming around there is done by Panyars, as the entirely Mestizo population is called. The Black Arawacks, who are culturally Amerindian, do most of the fishing. What then do the White Creoles do? They do what log-cutting is still being done thereabouts. Aniline dyes have swept away the demand for logwood, and the mahogany has long been exhausted. But when baulks of rosewood and spars of pine or Santa Maria, logs of serricoty, or emmory, are cut, it is the White Creoles who cut it. And when not doing that, they sit upon their verandahs, drinking rum and watered lime-juice, and they murmur of Good King George's Golden Days . . . that Good King being, of course, George II.

" 'Tired of fish-tea and rice-and-beans'?" Ruddy—for Rudderick—Goforth repeated, as one should repeat, " 'Tired of life?' "

"Pretty tired of'm, yes," Limekiller agreed. He sipped from the bottom of his glass. There hadn't been much rum to start with and it had been of low proof: but the lime-tree after all grew in the front yard, and even if one didn't know much else, one knew that lime-juice kept away the dreaded scurvy. There was, this time, a different and a more bitter taste in the glass, but no mystery was involved . . . and neither was Angos-

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tura . . . idly he picked up the piece of paper which Ruddy had copied, he said, from an old book, and read once more the careful capitals.

> *A Sovran Cure for The Small Feaver. Take one small bottle of white Rum called by Y^e^ Spaniard a chaparita and lay therein three twigs of the Yerb Contribo and lett it steep for three Dayes. Drink 1 oz. morning and one ozz Evening for 3 dayes and Y^e^ maye see Y^e^ Feaver abate. Cauton* [sic] *do not use same Twiggs more than thrice.*

It was an *old* "old book." Ruddy asked how "Jock" was feeling. "Jock" shrugged. "I guess the fever's gone down," he said. "It wasn't much of a fever anyway."

Ruddy covered his long chin with his long hand, and took thought. "Well . . . if the fever has gone down . . . and you still hasn't got no appetite—"

"Didn't say that I have no appetite. Said that I have no appetite for fish-tea and rice-and-beans."

Goforth looked upward, as though an information might be lodged on the ridge-pole of his house. From the outside, nothing looked trashier than the thatched roof of a "trash house," at once shaggy and so soon shabby: from the inside, nothing looked more beautiful and more symmetrical: compensation, this was called. John L. Limekiller could not see it, but evidently Rod. Goforth could, and—having found the information—took his hand away from his chin and slowly opened his mouth. Also in the yard were the purple-drooping jacaranda trees. The book said its flowers were blue . . . *blue!* . . . but any fool could see they were purple.

Almost as though determined to exhibit a prime feature of the classical old White Creole accent, R. Goforth said, "Vhat you vants to do is to elewate your wittles." He gave a great nod.

" 'Elevate my—' "

"Get you a tin of carn-*beef.* Get you a tin of peas-with-salad-cream." He almost smacked his lips as he named these imported delicacies, and sounded rather like a physician of the previous century recommending a couple of dozen oysters, some canvasback duck, and a pint of champagne.

His guest sighed. "What I'd like to get me is some back-bacon and a couple of eggs. But when I mentioned *write-it-down* to Domingo Aung," the entire Aung extended family, to which Aurelio was Titular Uncle, maintained the tradition of Spanish-language given-names perhaps dating back to days when kings named Alfonso reigned over Manila as well as Malaga; "to Domingo Aung, he suddenly got very hard of hearing."

R. Goforth signified by a sort of rictus that well he knew the occasional auricular difficulty of Aurelio Aung and Clan. Then, "I tells you vhat,"

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said he. "You vants to picquet the beach at night, and get you a few tortle eggs; bock-bacon, forget about it until you gets rich again."

And he told Jack this, and he told Jack that, and he told Jack a few other things; also he told Jack *this:* "Ond in case they *should* apprehend you, vhich I wery much doubts, as po-licemen doesn't vant to poke around such places at night unless eat ease really big-*time,* but suppose they *should:* here is vhat you remember: stout denial. You does understand that? Neh-wer confess! E-wen if ah dead body lie before you, stout . . . denial! Maybe it fool you, get up and valk avay, maybe somebody help it valk. . . . The Lah of Ewwidence is ah chancy thing. This is a *Brit*ish country—this is not a *Frinch* country—not a *Span*iard country—the police gots to produce ewwidence you are guilty. So—"

" 'Stout . . . denial.' "

"Stout . . . denial."

Likely, (Limekiller was thinking, waiting on the log just above high-water mark) likely if his lovely lady, Felix, was hereabouts he would have found something better to do of nights. Also, Felix (*née* Felicia) would have spurred him on to borrow a shotgun and go hunting gibnut, or maybe even armadillo . . . wild-*hog* . . . ante*lope* (very well: it was really a small dear, it *ate* well, didn't it). . . . But Felix and her cousin May were in King Town, getting their residence permits renewed, shopping for piece goods and native arts and crafts, getting books out of the National Library: officially. *Un*officially: also going to parties and to events very generally called *funs.* Maybe he, Jack, did not altogether like this last notion, for who knows whom Felix might *meet?* But he did not own her, nor her gleaming copper-red hair, nor her lovely long body; and he could not control her goings or her doings. So. . . .

Here he was, and what was that, barely he could see it but he *could* see it, its back breaking the surface of the water (not the surf, no, there was no surf to speak of within the reef-protected waters of the Great Bay of Hidalgo: the water). . . ? Sure enough, as it came nearer and nearer, only a turtle would be homing in to land amid the shallows. The creature seemed to give no heed to possible danger, it hesitated not for a single moment, on it came, in it came, up it came, it dragged its large body up upon the beach and, propelling its bulk across the sands, crawled and crawled and . . . then it stopped. Began to dig. Kept on digging.

He could not only see the sand it was excavating with its hind flippers, he could hear it falling back down; he could also hear . . . and had been hearing . . . faint sounds of music from Woodcutters Cove Town . . . principally the faint sounds of the juke-boxes in the various "liquor booths," not indeed of Creole or Bayfolk music, for those traditions were alas dying: of the recorded popular music of the United States, of Jamaica. . . .

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And also, or instead, as the soft wind shifted, as the rock and reggae paused long enough sometimes for the records to be changed, he heard something else, heard a music quite different: it was, must be, could only be, the sound of Mrs. Standish playing her spinnet. It was of course softer than the sounds of the clamorous juke-boxes, but it was also nearer. Almost an axiom: the tropics are not kind to stringed instruments. No, and perhaps the tropics were not particularly kind to Mrs. Standish, either; she was the wife of the Anglican minister, Limekiller had not officially met her, but he had more than once seen her, an aging woman with a loosening face and figure. Mister Standish had a Dedicated countenance and it grew more Dedicated with the passing of time; Mrs. Standish's face merely grew older.

The sand flashed, the sand fell. Why should the sand flash? Was that only the *sand* he was hearing? Did sand clash and ring? He did not want to disturb the great sea-she-turtle, assuming it to be disturbable, but he was moved to arise and to get him, so softly as he could, adown the nighttime sands. The turtle showed no signs of alarm—of, even, awareness: slowly he drew near. Surely . . . surely *not!*

> I walked along the evening sea
> And dreamed a dream which could not be.
> The evening waves, breaking on the shore,
> Said only, Dreamer, dream no more.

Where was that from? Who cared. He stooped. His hands moved in the heap of cast-up sand. His fingers clutched a something, and he drew it out. He drew out a few more. Deliberating himself be calm, he took his shirt off and spread it on the beach a few feet away from the constantly-increasing heaps of sand, and, finding no stone, anchored it first with a chunk of coconut shell. Then he could contain himself no longer; into the wood which fringed the beach he went, crouched, carefully considered the matter of direction, struck a match. Looked. *Was* Charles II indeed King of France as well as of England, Scotland, Ireland? Probably not, probably it was not even an idle boast but merely a habit, a reflex, to describe him as such. *No King of England if not King of France* . . . ?—but that was long before. The mosquitoes, no longer kept even somewhat at bay by the sea-breezes, fiercely sounded their shrill sounds and attacked: let them. He held in his hand, John Lutwidge Limekiller, a coin of twenty-one shillings and minted (presumably) from gold mined in *the great Kingdom of Guinea;* he had little idea—he had *none!*—what the current value of such a coin might be, but he knew that it had to be more than twenty-one shillings—twenty-one pounds would not value it enough!

Money! Money! Here he had had scarcely enough to eat, and now he would be rich! for, although he had as yet no way of knowing how many golden guineas there were . . . let alone where they had come from . . . some

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foundered ship whose timbers perhaps broken on the reef, yet had (perhaps) managed to get inside that same before sinking altogether and before the officers or crew were able to manage salvaging the gold, or all of it . . . perhaps it was indeed the universally-magic thing, a Buried Treasure! . . . perhaps the loot of some captured galleon or—what difference did it make!—a thousand perhapses! He, John Lutwidge Limekiller, was rich!—comparatively speaking—he was (maybe) *rich!*

Only maybe not.

The she-turtle had had enough of digging, her nest-hole was now deep enough, and began to lay.

Rich? Only maybe not. His fingers told him, after he had crept back to the great chelonian, that there were many coins in the hoard: how might that coast have shifted over the centuries because of storm, erosion, hurricane, and flood . . . and his mind told him something else.

In every grant of freehold stood the words, and he knew them well, for he had, after all had been granted more than one freehold himself, for all that they were for but small acreages; there stood the words, *All Indian Ruins and Mines of Gold and Silver and Precious Stones are the Property of Her Majesty the Queen, Her Heirs or Assignees:* these words were emphatic and clear and admitted of no dispute. Well . . . almost none. Suppose such gold were already mined? Coined? Abandoned? Kicked up on a beach by the hind-flippers of a gravid sea-turtle with no more on her membrane-thing template of a mind than digging a hole in which to plash her scores and scores of opalescent eggs; what? Why, for that matter, was there only *one* turtle here and now? A matter for enquiry; would anyone enquire?

And . . . wasn't there something, somewhere, amidst all the antique and baroque legal terminology about treasure-trove and bonavaconcia, wasn't there something about high-water mark? low-water mark? What should Jack *do?* For certainly he had to *do* something . . . and right now: one could hardly expect the turtle would remain fixed for a landmark whilst he ran loping along the strand to report the matter.

And so he had taken the gold, he had shoveled and sifted, long after the turtle's instinct, located in that reptilian little head protruding between carapace and carapace, had told her that her oviducts might now rest; and off she had waddled, struggled, crawled, dipped into the water, sank into the water, was gone into the water: and about the sum of two-score and ten coins had he sifted from the sands. He had carefully set them down on his shirt, and, since it was the bad shirt, rent in at least one place and worn thin in others, he had tied the treasure by the sleeves and knotted them and then he had stripped off his trousers and slipped the swag inside of them and closed that outer covering up, then—

Then he hied him down to the mangroves brown where the sea-tide

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sucked and sawed . . . or something like that. . . very much like that . . . and had heaved it up onto his own boat, videlicet the *Sacarissa*, then lying at the mouth of Mangrove Creek, with all her apparel. And, after counting it a few times, say, about forty or fifty times, had stowed it in the cubby; well . . . he had taken the trousers back, first, because really he needed them *now*.

Also he had recollected to bring along a few of the eggs, and he set up the caboose, which, in British Hidalgo had no reference to railroad trains but referred to the little wood-stove set in a sand-box; and he had cooked them at leisure and eaten them with relish, and with salt and with pepper.

They had tasted better than rice and beans.

Eggs.

As for turtle-eggs, very well, *never* mention the matter to anyone Chinese, however defined. As for eggs as something other than victuals (*wittles,* as Rud Goforth called them), as something thick with legendary qualities, there were also the *o*beah eggs. *O*beah eggs came color-coded: a clean white egg meant one thing, a clean brown egg meant another; a speckled egg, whether the birdy sings of them or not, meant worst of all; and then there were eggs still stained with chickenshit and clotted with tufts of down and, sometimes, blood. A chapter in a local grimoire (were there such a thing, and there wasn't) might be written about eggs stained red with anatto and eggs stained red with red mangrove bark . . . and the immense difference (qualitative rather than quantitative) between them.

But . . . why does the eggs left at night symbolize death?

Because the egg left at day symbolizes life.

Is why.

He had meant to report it.

But the hours, as hours will, had gone by. The gold still stood (or sat) in the cramped cubby of his boat. And he had not reported it.

Sailing south you see the weird sugarloaf-shaped hills behind Spanish Bight; whereas elsewhere, some hills seem five miles away and are actually twenty-five, these hills seem to be one-and-twenty miles away, but are really only one. One mile away, that is. A curious phenomenon. They rise out of the midst of palm trees which look rather like the giant ferns of earth's past eras; easily one may imagine dinosaurs nibbling on the tops of them. Something similar . . . could one call it confusion . . . delusion . . . afflicted Limekiller. He had forgotten to cross off how many days on his calendar (it advertized *30 Pure Turkish Cigarette 3o / M., Grower and Mfger* rather garishly, and was generally understood

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to have been also of, if not the growth, then of the manufacture, also, of M.: but that was another story. Indeed.) how many days had he forgotten to cross off? he could not think how many. When had he found the trove of gold coins? had it been last night? the night before last? several nights ago? Limekiller was no longer, and perhaps had never been, from the moment Doubt entered his mind, quite sure. At all sure. And, on the other hand, if he stayed aboard his boat, he would only be driven again to count the coins, and he could see himself becoming a latter-day Silas Marner: This would not do.

If he left the boat, might not someone come aboard of her and peek and peer and probe and. . . . Nobody ever *had.* Before. So he had gone, he told himself, for a Walk. And the possibilities for walking being limited, had found himself going into the hamlet called Woodcutters Cove. A hamlet it might be (might *be?* it *was.*), but it was also what foreigners sometimes called "the provincial capital": not quite. A District was not really a province, being a Canadian Limekiller knew all about provinces, provinces had lieutenant-governors, premiers, legislative assemblies—a District had none of these. It had a District Commissioner, who was an administrative officer, the name of the District was Seville (pronounced by every man, woman, and child in British Hidalgo as *Civil,* just exactly the same as Shakespeare pronounced it, *The King is as civil as an orange,* a pun which had baffled Shakespearean scholars—none of whom had ever lived in British Hidalgo—almost ever since the death of James I and V), and its capital was Woodcutters Cove . . . though there was talk of moving it to Seville Town, where the citrus works were, and the bitter "civil oranges" made into marmalade. But they had been talking about that at least since King Edward had abdicated, not that there was necessarily a connection.

Limekiller passed the old Anglican Church, the Parson's Paddock, the Parsonage, and expected next to pass about a quarter of a mile of trash houses until he came to the shops and the liquor booths, and had begun to wonder at which one of the latter his credit might still be good, not at the Juno Club, not at the New Africa, not at the Bayman's Bogue, maybe at the Little Bit of Heaven? maybe at the Hidalgo Club? when his wonders were interrupted by his being hailed from the Government Building in the following words, "Mr. Limekiller! May I give you a hail?"

Grammatically, the question was not without fault. And to reply with some such reply as, "What in the hell have you just been *do*ing you dumb son of a bitch?" was socially contra-indicated. The man who from an office window had called to him was Percival FitzEvans Blythe; Percival FitzEvans Blythe was perhaps not very distinguished-looking, he was perhaps not very well set-up, and even perhaps he had not a very intriguing personality; but there was one thing about him which admitted

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of no *perhaps:* and Limekiller, suddenly a prey to the dismals, was well aware of what this was.

"Good afternoon, District Commissioner," said Limekiller.

"Would you just step inside, Mr. Limekiller," said Mr. P.F.E. Blythe, without a question-mark. And popped his head back in. The Stamp Acts, which had caused so many heart-flutterings and tea-bashings in British North America (old boundaries) had never disturbed a single soul in British Hidalgo, where in proposing a written contract it was proverbial to remark, "If you has the Queen's head on a stamp, and a dollar for earnest, you cahn't go wrong." Limekiller now felt, dimly recollecting Mark Twain's comment that the average man would rather see General Grant in full dress uniform than Lillian Russell naked, felt that he would much, *much* rather pay to see the Queen's head on a thousand stamps than Percival FitzEvans Blythe at a window or anywhere else for free, stepped inside. And whilst doing so he encountered a licensed (so to speak) beggar commonly called Wee-Wee; Wee-Wee seldom encountered Jack without asking for a dime or a shilling or a glass of rum or a plate of rice and *bean,* always with a face the most ingratiating; his face now seemed to say, "I may not be six feet tall and blonde and I may be just getting out of gaol again for being publically intoxicated and Pissing on The Plinth but on the other hand neither have I just been asked by the District Officer if I would step inside." They passed each other in a strange and strong silence.

"You wanted to see me, District Commissioner?"

The District Commissioner curtly gestured towards a chair facing him and, when Limekiller had seated himself, stared at him a moment without words, then asked, "Well, Mr. Limekiller, what about this gold?"

The shock was immense. Had he not already been suffering from a guilty conscience, the shock would have been even more immense and it was to be feared that he would almost at once have incriminated himself, had he not suddenly remembered Rud Goforth's advice; "What gold?" he asked.

Another silence. Then the D.C. said, "Mr. Limekiller, anyone may bring charges and make accusations," said the D.C. "And anyone may bear witness, true or false. But under our system of British Justice," there was a slight but significant emphasis, *British Justice,* "something more is needed, and that is Evidence. Evidence openly presented in an open court at an open trial," the word *trial* doing more to chill Limekiller's blood than his sole trip to northern Labrador had done. "Mere testimony is not sufficient. We require *evidence.* Ev-i-dence. No evidence? No case." He made a gesture.

Someone else now appeared, namely Police Constable Lucas; more

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than once P.C. Lucas had helped Jack demolish a chaparita of rum (without the herb Contribo) at a club or booth; there was no trace of any such memory on the P.C.'s face now. "Would you read your notes," said the District Officer. *Would* you step inside. *Would* you read your notes. The District Commissioner was expert in the donning of the velvet glove. But well did John L. Limekiller know what lay inside.

"Acting upon information received," read P.C. Lucas, "I went in the police launch to the place called Mangrove Creek, accompanied by Mr. Stopford the District Surveyor—"

Limekiller was puzzled, for the first time, genuinely. "The, ah, Sur*vey*or?" he interrupted.

The skies did not fall at this interruption. It was explained to him that it was well-known that the mouth of Mangrove Creek had at one time been located just inside the limits of Woodcutters Cove Town. And it was well-known that the effects of Hurricane Henrietta had closed that mouth and opened another . . . which lay outside the Town limits. It was also known that Hurricane Elvia had quite estopped this and opened yet another. But it was not known if this new mouth lay in or out of the limits. "The question of mooring fees," explained the D.C. *Money.*

On coming into sight of the vessel known to them as the boat *Sacarissa* registered as belonging to Mr. John Lutwidge Limekiller, P.C. Lucas and Surveyor Stopford observed two individuals unfamiliar to them moving about on the deck of aforesaid vessel and attempting to hand down an object not immediately identifiable to a third individual in a cayuco; did the two Officials open fire upon them? did they attempt to cut off their retreat? was the Magna Carta written in Volapuk?

". . . we then hailed the three individuals," read P.C. Lucas, virtuously, "but they at once made their craft to the opposite bank, and escaped into the bush. We would have pursued them but," here the P.C. raised his eyes to those of his superior, who evaded them in a manner which indicated that he was at that moment passing no judgment as to *should* they have pursued said three individuals into the bush but might raise the matter at a time subsequent; ". . . but upon observing that the object they had dropped was spilling gold coins we thought it best to return with it and them at once and to report the matter to the District Commissioner," and here he closed his notebook and stood with his legs apart.

"You recognize this shirt, Mr. Limekiller?" Limekiller would at that moment have been willing to swear upon a copy of Domesday Boke and/or the British North America Act that he did not even recognize that it *was* a shirt, except that—

—except that it had been mended once by Felix who, not content with sewing up its rents and tears had also sewed onto the right breast the initials *JL* in very large letters: and if there was anyone in the entire

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District of Seville who had not seen him wearing it, it could only have been Blind Bob who sat in the Market Place, with his sightless eyes rolling, making baskets out of native rushes. Hardly perhaps a case where the principle of Stout Denial seemed in order. "Yes," said Mr. Limekiller.

"We have examined these coins and find them to be golden guineas of the Reigns of Charles II, James II, and William III," said the District Commissioner . . . and indeed one would scarcely have needed to be a member of the Royal Association of Numismatists to have done so . . . with the monarchs' names and titles emphatically emprinted on the coins in neat Latin abbreviations.

"You may know, Mr. Limekiller, that although it is not forbidden to own such coins, their ownership must be registered with the Treasury," Mr. Limekiller took advantage of the pause to say nothing, "in order to establish the question of rightful ownership." Pause. Mr. Limekiller continued to say nothing. "So you see there is more than one question we have to answer," the D.C. began to tick them off on his fingers, "One, are these your gold coins? Two, if they are, then why have they not been registered? Three: if they have not been registered because you have just recently acquired them, then where and when and *how* did you acquire them? We perceive that there seems to be sand mixed among the gold and lying in the shirt which they were wrapped in. Can it be that the coins of gold were just recently dug up somewhere?—say, somewhere on the shore? In such a case we would have to add Question Number Four: was the gold obtained in an illegal manner or fashion?" Jack noted that the possibility that he had obtained the gold whilst illegally taking turtle eggs had not been raised: he himself was not going to raise it. "Question *Five:* is it not so that even if the gold was taken from someone who had himself illegally failed to register it, would that make the taking of it by someone else other than illegal? no—it would NOT! Theft would be and is *theft!* Mind you," said the D.C., "I don't accuse you of theft. Nor do I accuse you of having the gold in your possession—although you don't deny do you, *hav*ing the gold in your possession, do you? —other than legally?"

Limekiller cleared his throat, but with great control refrained from saying, "Ahh." Or even "Umm." He said, "Who says it was in my possession?"

The District Commissioner sat for a second with his mouth open. "Why who? Two of our Government officials . . . no . . . well . . . if the gold was not in your possession, then how did it come to be on your boat?"

"Maybe the same ones who were taking it off, put it on?"

The D.C. brushed away an invisible fly. "Why would they have done

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that?" And Limekiller quickly pointed out that it was not for him to ascertain their motives. "Best that you ask *them* that," he suggested. And the D.C. looked up at the P.C. But P.C. Lucas continued to stand At Ease, saying nothing.

The District Commissioner now looked his invited guest straight between the eyes and said, "Now, Mr. Limekiller, it is not prohibited to own gold coins regardless of are they legal tender or not and the question, 'Are such coins still legal tender or not' is one into which I will not go;" echoes of Churchill's reply to the new secretary telling him not to end a sentence with a preposition: "This is an impertinence up with which I will not put." —"however, we are obliged to ahsk, I will not say demand" (and, *Damned nice of you!* thought Jack) "how you did get these coins, because they are not in shall we say common ownership. So I shall now ahsk you that question."

There was a loonng pause. Then the D.C. said, "Very well." He gestured to P.C. Lucas, who gathered up the shirt and its precious contents, the D.C. meanwhile unlocking the huge and antique safe, which would certainly not cause Mr. Jimmy Valentine or his successors much trouble; but where was *he?* It would certainly baffle anybody in Woodcutters Cove, Seville District: shoved the stuffed shirt in under the shelves of official documents, closed and clicked it shut. "We shall, I trust, see you here at shall we say eight of the morning. Good evening, Mr. Limekiller . . . and I should advise you to think it over."

And think it over Jack did. All night long.

There was nobody for him to think it over aloud with . . . save his former First Mate, Skippy the Cat who had been demoted in favor of Felix. *Did* Skip chant pieces of eight, pieces of eight? Nope: he offered no grounds for belief that because and just because Jack had not been confined in the district gaol for the night that he might not find himself confined there—or in the national one—at some future time. D.C. FitzEvans was a Bayman and hence "cradled on the water," as were they all: he would know the state of the winds without even taking thought, and he would know that the state of the winds would not carry Limekiller on a flight from Colonial waters at this time. Not only not to "Republican waters," not to anywhere well—the winds would indeed carry him now right onto the Muggleton Shoals and there he . . . or his boat . . . might have to wait a very long time indeed before any friendly boats and their crews appeared to help tow . . . push . . . pull . . . shove him off; because right on the mainland circumjacent to the Muggleton Shoals was the cabin of old Sully Simpson, a very *loud* lunatic who notoriously kept open house for Tata Duende, the Spook of the Woods; and nobody darker than lard would come or go within a marine mile of the area.

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Therefore, even if he, John Lutwidge Limekiller, was safely out of gaol for the night, such safety could hardly be expected to continue for very long. Maybe they *couldn't* prove that he had the gold illegally (though maybe they *could).* And if not, maybe they couldn't get him for not having registered it. Or maybe the question of, had he been poaching turtle eggs wouldn't be raised *(would* Ruddy Goforth . . . ? not without incriminating himself for Abetting, he wouldn't).

Back and forth his mind raced, with many and many a *But,* a *So,* an *And* all night long. And all the early morning . . . because in British Hidalgo, "eight of the morning" was absolutely not *early!*

—and as, for that matter, *who* were The Individuals who had boarded the *Sacarissa* and attempted to rob her—Limekiller had no idea. The Colony . . . which, being irrevocably on its way to independence . . . would not be a Colony for much longer . . . had been for long out of the way of the world: but the world, with its internal combustion engines, its radios, its vices, and its crimes, was inexorably creeping in. Jack did not wish to think that the robbers were Nationals (the phrase was replacing the old, bad word Colonials), but it seemed unlikely that foreigners would have come up from Republican waters in a cayuco—but it really didn't matter . . . just as it really didn't matter that if he had been content to, in the delicate Hidalgo phrase, "ease himself" near to the boat instead of seeking the privacy of the bush on his way to town then he might have spied the intruders and scared them off. . . .

Once again, as so often, he passed the Parsonage, passed the Parson's Paddock, passed the Anglican Church, and came to the Government Building.

This time Wee-Wee (he was named after the wee-wee ant, which, with its voracious appetite, counterfeits the leaf-eating wee-wee disease) was not on the steps. But that didn't really matter, either.

The District Commissioner wasted neither time nor words.

"Now, Mr. Limekiller, what about this gold?"

J.L. recalled yet again Ruddy Goforth's Principle: " 'Stout denial,' Regardless and whatever: *'stout . . . denial.'* " For . . . after all . . . what alternative? Even if he didn't get charged with this offense or that offense there was the very good (or very bad) chance of being ordered to leave the country and not come back. And he had, really, grown to love the little land, smaller than Newfoundland, British Hidalgo, the "country that you can put your arms around," even if it was also "the end of the line." Being there, even with its bugs and spooks, was and had for quite a time been better than being in Toronto in the snow—and even if it rained just as much as it rained in Vancouver, well the rain was warmer. And also . . . well . . . never mind. . . .

"What gold?" he asked.

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The D.C. looked a moment at him. Then he swiveled his chair around and worked at the dial of the old safe. The official papers laced with their red tape were where they had been. Nothing much else was there. The D.C. scraped his hands along the bottom. Some grains of sand. Some crumbles of dirt. The bad old shirt. Nothing else. *Nothing* else. The D.C. turned around. His mouth worked. Then he said, "Mr. Limekiller. *Where is that gold?*"

Jack felt his lips crack. But all he said was, staunchly, "What gold?"

Another silence. Then, moved by the devil, Limekiller said, "District Commissioner, *I will thank you for that shirt—*"

The District Commissioner took out the shirt, shook it, handed it over. Then he made an emphatic gesture, Limekiller left. He sneaked a look at Police Constable Lucas, but Police Constable Lucas, carefully looking at the wall, did not sneak back. The D.C. was, suddenly, shouting, "I shall call in the C.I.D.! I shall have the safe dusted for fingerprints! I shall discharge every police constable on duty lahst night! I shall take it up to the Colonial Privy Council! I shall take it up to the Law Lords in London! I—" The door closed on him and on what else he should do. Only, of course, he wouldn't. For—

No evidence?
No case!
Because—
British Justice!

The outside world had begun to bring in its rot and corruption. But it had only begun.

Outside . . . well, not outside the District Office Building . . . outside the office of the District Commissioner . . . Limekiller found himself in the familiar-enough out-district police room. These rooms served for many purposes which were not always involved with crime, and, while not always the same, were always similar. This one had of course been whitewashed—but not very recently. It was immaculate. As always. On the wall (invariably), two framed photographs: Her Majesty the Queen, who theoretically *owned* British Hidalgo and might, theoretically, sell it all to a real estate syndicate—but probably wouldn't; that was one of the photographs. The other, just a mite smaller, was of the Honorable Llewellyn Gonzaga MacBride, the Queen's First Minister in British Hidalgo. She was in full regalia. He was wearing a shortsleeved shirt open at the neck, no tie. They both wore smiles.

Overhead the slow fan.
At the dais, no one.
Not now, at any rate.

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Behind a table doing extra duty as a desk, a police constable. He and Jack exchanged civil looks.

"Yes, Mr. Limekiller?"

"Am I, well, free to go? Eh?"

The P.C. slightly pursed his lips, slightly raised his eyebrows. It was the studiously non-committal face of a man being asked to guess the value of a sand-sailing-barge. He rose to his feet in a smooth motion. "If you will just make yourself at ease a moment, Mr. Limekiller, I will just go into the. . . ." He did not finish the sentence, but its meaning was obvious. The door of the inner office was opened for a moment, a voice (previously muffled) was heard, loud and clear, demanding to know "Why is there no Canadian High Commissioner in this Colony?—do they think that they can come down here and commit all kinds of tricks, just because they are from a Commonwealth country? I—what? *what?* He is still here? Out, *out,* OUT—get him *out!* I shall—" and the door closed again and the police-constable returned to his desk.

Slightly he shook his head, said, "Jock, you w'only vex de man!" "Only," in Baytalk, an intensive: during a heat wave, it was "only" hot; during a downpour, it was "only" raining.

Jack said, "Eh?"

The police constable was once again studying the sand-barge. Very politely, though, he indicated the door to the outside world. "Mr. Limekiller," he said, "you are now at large."

Limekiller walked down the street. First building in the next block, shaded by a purple-drooping jacaranda tree, was . . . still . . . sun-worshippers or not . . . the Anglican Church, crusted with lichens and moss. Would he go in and give thanks? There was, really, a lot of work he should be doing on his boat before Felix got back. *Whatsoever thy hands find to do, do it with thy might:* Best he got back to his boat and think his pious thoughts there. But the way took him past the Parson's Paddock, where no horse had pastured for many years. And then the way took him past the Parsonage and its late Tropical Gothic verandahs shielding the inner rooms from view. But not from sound. In the Parsonage was, evidently, the Parson's wife, Mrs. Standish. The climate was, indeed, "not kind" to the spinnet. Perhaps also Mrs. Standish's singing voice was past its prime. But gallantly she played and sang. He could hear her quite clearly. *Believe me, if all those endearing young charms,* sang Mrs. Standish, *which I gaze on so fondly today, were to fleet by tomorrow and fade in my arms,* Mrs. Standish sang. The waters of the Bay of Hidalgo slapped languidly along the shore. What had happened during the night? what had *happened?—like fairy gifts fading away,* sang Mrs. Standish.

Limekiller got into his skiff. ●

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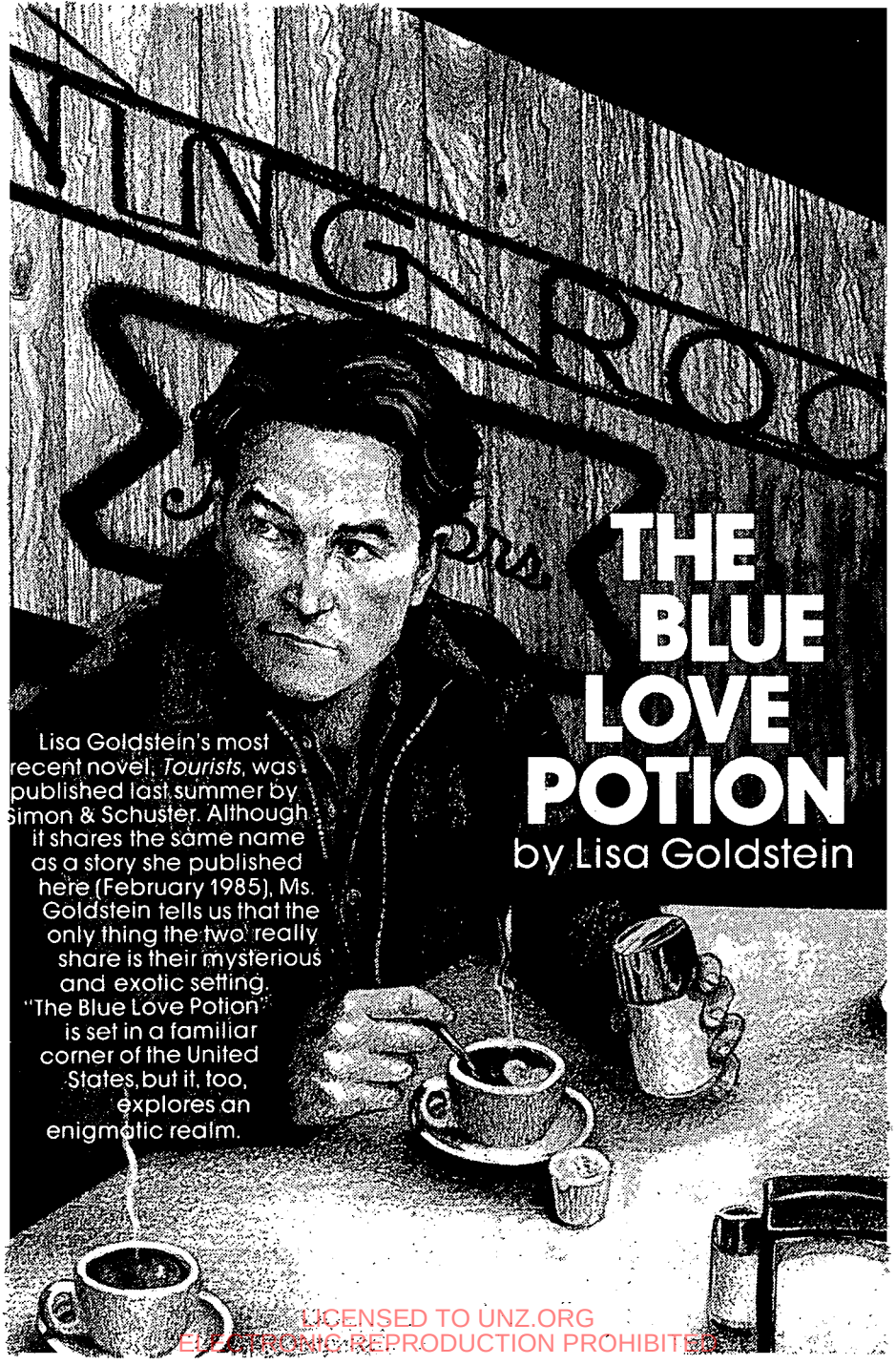

THE BLUE LOVE POTION

by Lisa Goldstein

Lisa Goldstein's most recent novel, *Tourists*, was published last summer by Simon & Schuster. Although it shares the same name as a story she published here (February 1985), Ms. Goldstein tells us that the only thing the two really share is their mysterious and exotic setting. "The Blue Love Potion" is set in a familiar corner of the United States, but it, too, explores an enigmatic realm.

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All together, Rose had the love potion for six years.

Six years ago she and her best friend Vicki drove from Los Angeles to Mexico, hoping to find a shaman like the one in the Carlos Castenada books. In three weeks of wandering they met only students from the United States, all of them searching for the same thing, all of them eager to trade rumors. Rose suggested to Vicki that they could make a fortune by publishing a newsletter, *Shaman Times*, and selling it to the students.

The day before they went home they met the old woman. She looked exactly like what they were after, gray-haired, dressed in a heavy embroidered skirt and shawl. A *bruja*. She stood in the central plaza of one of the innumerable small towns they had seen, holding out to them a tiny glass bottle filled with a startlingly blue liquid.

They stopped immediately to talk to her. She spoke no English, and Rose could only speak bad high school Spanish. Vicki, who had taken French, was no help at all. After a while, though, Rose understood that the old woman had no wisdom or exotic drugs to give them, that she wanted to sell them—to Rose's astonishment—a love potion. She was so insistent that Rose and Vicki bought one each.

"But you must be careful, Rosa," the woman said. Rose translated slowly and with the help of a dictionary, and even then she was not at all sure she followed what the woman was saying. "You must not give this to the first man who comes along. You must wait until you find a man you can spend your life with, and then you must give it to him. Only then."

For four years she and Vicki played a game that revolved around the blue bottle. In their weekly phone calls they talked about the men they had dated and the men they would like to date, and after each description the other said, "Yeah, but would you give him the love potion?" Then they both laughed. One year Vicki met a man who came close and the next year Rose nearly took the bottle out of her jewelry box and poured it in her date's drink, but both had backed off. "If he was really right for you," Rose said over the phone, "you wouldn't need the potion. He'd love you anyway."

"You're an incurable romantic," Vicki said.

The year Rose met James she thought the game had ended. A friend pointed him out at a party. "That's the guy I was telling you about," he said. "He does stand-up comedy. I never saw anyone so funny in my life."

At first she couldn't find him in the crowd. He was surrounded by what seemed to be every good-looking woman at the party. When he finally came over to talk to them she was surprised to see that he was a little fat and had no-color, protruding eyes. Her friend introduced them and he stayed close to her all evening, commenting wryly on the guests, the food, the host's furniture. Women came up to talk to him and laughed

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at everything he said, even if it was only, "How you doing?" But he got rid of them quickly and continued his private monologue. She felt enormously flattered he had singled her out.

They moved in together six months later. "Would you give him the potion?" Vicki asked over the phone. James was out at a comedy club.

"I don't need to," Rose said. She had always wanted to say that.

"You sure?" Vicki said. "What's he doing this very minute?"

"Flirting with every pretty woman in the club," Rose said. "But he'll come back."

After she hung up Rose went to the bathroom and looked at her face in the mirror. There were shadows under her eyes and she put on makeup to cover them. She stepped out of the high heels she had started wearing—James had said he liked tall women—and went back into the living room to wait for him.

Should she use the potion? James liked her in part for her looks, but how long would her looks last? And his continuous monologue, while it still made her laugh, had never broadened out to become a dialogue. There was a lot he didn't know about her. He still didn't know, for example, that she was trying to write a screenplay.

Did she really want to spend the rest of her life with him?

Over the weeks, after James had gone out for the evening, she told Vicki her fears one by one. James would not come home that night. James would become successful and want to move to New York. James would leave her for another woman.

During the day she worked in a shopping mall, selling cookies. She smiled at the customers and asked if she could help them, she weighed the cookies on the scale, she made change, and she thought almost entirely of herself and James. She had stopped working on the screenplay, though that wasn't really James's fault. It just didn't seem that important when weighed against his career and his ambitions.

"I'll bet you," someone said behind her after she had rung up a sale, "that I can talk to the next person who comes up here in Japanese, and that they'll answer me in fluent Japanese."

She turned around. She knew the man's name was Terry, but she couldn't remember talking to him before. "What?" she said. Terry repeated his bet.

"Okay," she said, and when the next person came up to the counter, a man with four children in tow, she watched carefully as Terry said, "Hi!" and the man, looking a little puzzled at Terry's emphasis, answered, "Hi!"

It was a relief to laugh, though she tried to wait until the man and his children had gone. "All right," she said to Terry. "What do you win?"

"I don't know," he said. "Want to go out for lunch?"

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"Sure," she said.

They went to the salad bar a few shops over and took their salads to the crowded central area serving all the fast-food shops. "So," Terry said. "Go to any auditions lately?"

"No," she said. "I'm not—I don't want to act."

"You're the only one, then," he said. "Too smart, I guess."

"I'm not that smart," she said. "I'm writing—I was writing—a screenplay."

"Really?" he said. "What's it about?"

"Oh, well . . ." she said. "It's not something I want to talk about. I take it you go to auditions."

"Yeah," he said. "Or I would, if I got called for more of them. I'm thirty years old, and if you haven't made it in L.A. by the time you're thirty you're a failure."

"So what do you want to do?"

"I don't know," he said. "Sell cookies. It's a rewarding job, providing nourishment, spreading happiness to the people . . ."

"And so lucrative, too," she said.

"Yeah," he said. "Actually what I think I really want is to get the hell out of L.A."

"L.A.'s not so bad," she said. "People come here thinking they'll make a killing in the industry, and so all they ever talk to are other people trying to make a killing in the industry, and they never take the time to really get to know it. You can still find some interesting places in Los Angeles."

"Name one."

"Watts Towers," she said. "These crazy towers made out of concrete and pottery, built by an Italian immigrant who had no training at all in architecture. The Venice canals, built by another crazy guy who wanted to turn the beach into Venice, Italy. Some old parts near downtown, that still look like a small Spanish village—Should I go on?"

"That's okay," he said.

"But you know what?" she said. "Sometimes all I want is to get the hell out of L.A. myself."

"Why?"

"Because of what you said," she said. "If you haven't made it here by the time you're thirty you're a failure."

"You're thirty?" he said. "You're kidding. I thought you were twenty-five."

"I'm thirty-one," she said.

"Have you ever thought of acting?" he said.

"I don't want to say words other people put in my mouth," she said. "I want to write the words for them to say."

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He looked at the clock in the hot-dog stand. "Oh, my God," he said. "We've been here over an hour."

During the next few weeks she showed him all the places they had talked about at lunch. Then the inevitable happened: after a guest spot on David Letterman James left her for a younger women. She barely cared. Her grandmother died, and with her small legacy she and Terry got the hell out of Los Angeles, heading north along the California coast.

They pulled off for gas at a town represented by the smallest possible dot on the map. It was mid-afternoon, overcast and humid: the distant horizon looked as if someone had poured milk down from the sky.

"You hungry?" Terry asked, after they got back in the car.

"Yeah, a little," Rose said.

He made a U-turn in the middle of the street and drove down two blocks. They could hear the drag of the ocean a few streets over; Rose, still used to Los Angeles, kept thinking the sound was traffic. "Saw this on the way over," Terry said. He stopped in front of a restaurant with dusty neon tubing in the windows.

"Looks great," Rose said. They parked the car and went inside.

Once they were seated and looking at a menu they saw that the restaurant's specialty was ice cream: sundaes and floats and splits and single scoops. A box at the bottom of the menu, almost an afterthought, listed a few sandwiches.

"What the hell," Rose said. "I guess I'll just have ice cream."

"Okay," Terry said. "Me too."

The waitress brought the bill along with their order. Suddenly she realized, in a moment of sharp guilt that she tried to hide from Terry, that she hadn't looked at the prices. They had made a budget at the beginning of the trip, but each day away from Los Angeles they felt it become more and more of an irrelevance, about as important as a copy of the Magna Carta. Rose reached for the bill first.

"Look," she said. Her order, a chocolate sundae without whipped cream, had become "Choc Sun Wow." And Terry's, hot apple pie à la mode, had been changed by the waitress into "Happi Ala."

"Choc Sun Wow," Rose said. "Sounds like an alien. 'My name is Choc Sun Wow, take me to your leader.' "

"Happi Ala—that's a commune near Los Angeles," Terry said. "Anyone thinking negative thoughts is banished forever."

"When I was in grade school there was this kid who used to say, 'If we're not careful we'll all be blown to Kingdom Come,' " Rose said. "I guess he got it from the Late Show or something. But every time I heard him I thought he said Kingdom Kong. I kept thinking of this place ruled over by a giant ape, a happy place really, where you could do pretty

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much anything you wanted. Kong would take care of all those annoyances like your parents or your teachers. I bet that's what they eat there—Choc Sun Wow and Happi Ala. What do you think?"

"What?" Terry said.

"You weren't listening to me," Rose said. "Again."

"Sure I was," Terry said. "Actually, you know what I was thinking? I was thinking that now I know exactly what beauty is. Anyone who asks, you can refer them to me. I'll explain it."

"Okay," Rose said. "What is it?"

"It's change," he said. "Only things that change are beautiful. I was watching your face a moment ago and it was like looking at three or four people, one after the other. I couldn't take my eyes off you. When you looked at the bill you were so serious, and then you looked up and laughed, and then while you were talking you frowned and I could tell what you would look like in twenty years. I think I've really discovered something. It's only things that stay the same forever that are ugly."

"I still think you weren't listening," she said. "But since you're being so flattering I'll have to forgive you."

"It wasn't—" he said.

"Look," she said, pointing to the window behind him.

The neon tubing had been turned on. A V-shaped glass filled first with a red scoop of ice cream, then a blue one, then an orange one. A crescent moon, managing to smile even though his chin and nose nearly met, came on next, and then five stars, one after the other. The light stuttered out and blinked on again in the same order. The whole effect was so hideous, down to the garish colors thrown over the patrons sitting near the window, that there was something perversely appealing about it. They both began to laugh.

Darkness was beginning to seep in around the sign's bright colors. "What do you want to do now?" Terry asked. "It's getting too late to keep driving."

"I don't know," Rose said. "Maybe we can try to find a hotel somewhere."

"Okay," Terry said. They went outside and got back in the car. A few blocks later Rose said, "Over there," and Terry pulled over and looked doubtfully at the building she had pointed out.

It was an old Victorian, badly in need of repair. Gray paint flaked off the corner tower and the scrollwork under the gables, off the latticed balcony and the steps leading to the front porch. One of the mullioned windows on the third floor was broken and backed with cardboard, and the rest had been painted the same dull gray as the building. A sign on the lawn said "Seaside Hotel."

"You sure about this?" Terry said.

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"No," Rose said. They got out of the car and walked up the uneven brick path to the front doors. One door still had what looked like the original glass, beveled and etched like frost, but on the other the glass had been replaced with flat plate. They pushed open the doors.

A carpet of faded pink and green, worn completely through in a line from the door to the front desk, covered the floor. A tarnished brass light fixture dangled from an inverted cone in the ceiling. Rose had lived in an old apartment in Los Angeles where the floorboards shook every time she turned on the hot water, and she knew at once what the cone meant. The hotel had been lighted with gas a long time ago. "Switchboard Operator Wanted," said a sign propped up against the scarred desk counter.

"Can I help you?" the man behind the counter asked.

"I want to apply for the job," Rose said. "I can operate a switchboard."

The man looked not at her but at Terry. "I could use a handyman, too," he said. "What do you think? I can give you folks a room and a small salary."

"Just a minute," Terry said. He motioned Rose back toward the glass doors. "I didn't know you could work a switchboard," he said, whispering.

"I can't," she said. "How hard can it be?"

"I always said you should be an actress," he said. "But how long do we want to stay in this town, anyway? I thought we were going to San Francisco."

"I don't know," Rose said. "As long as it stays fun. We can always leave if we don't like it."

Terry nodded. "Okay," he said to the man waiting for their decision. "We'll do it."

At first, when they'd followed him up the stairs and seen their room, they had nearly turned around and left. The floorboards were so uneven in spots they were almost steps, and the rushes and waterlilies wallpaper peeled in patches like mange. But a wordless politeness made them bring their bags in from the car and start unpacking, and in only a few weeks, to their own amazement, they had adapted completely to the slow pace of the town.

Al, the man behind the counter, had been a minor chess master in the fifties and now owned the hotel. The old woman in 304 used to design costumes in Hollywood. Lynne, the younger waitress at the restaurant, was saving money to go away to college; the older waitress didn't speak to them and they never did learn her name.

In the evenings, after work, they went to the ice-cream parlor, or sometimes, rarely, to another restaurant in town. Back in their room they made love on the old brass bed, the headboard thumping to their rhythms against the wall. On weekends they went to the town's one

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movie theater or to the beach, laughing like the natives at the weekend visitors in their elaborate cars.

After a day of cutting off calls and connecting people to the wrong rooms Rose had managed to figure out the switchboard, which had to be at least fifty years old. Now she looked up as Terry, carrying a step-ladder, came through what Al called the reception room. "Are you hungry?" he said. "I can stop work in a few minutes."

"Yeah," Rose said. "The restaurant?"

"Sure."

Rose went up to the room to get her heavy red jacket and they walked the two blocks to the ice-cream parlor. Days by the ocean were hot and sultry, but in the evenings the temperature plummeted. Sometimes they could almost spot the moment of change, when the tourists on the beach, shocked at the sudden chill, began packing up to go home. The streets were crowded with cars. The restaurant's neon sign glowed from a block away, red, blue, orange. They put their arms around each other for warmth.

Once inside the restaurant they took their coats off. The stout older waitress came over to serve them. She wore white nurse's shoes and a white uniform. "A turkey sandwich," Rose said to her. "And a choc sun wow."

The waitress didn't smile. "I wonder," Rose said after she had gone, "how long it took her to get like that. She didn't even look at us."

"Lynne talks to us," Terry said.

"Lynne's a lot younger," Rose said. "I wonder if we'll ever get like that."

"Don't worry," Terry said. "You have a lot of promise."

"I'm a *switchboard* operator," Rose said, shaking her head.

"You're a switchboard operator with a lot of promise," Terry said. Rose laughed.

The waitress brought their order and Rose began to eat. "I got a letter today," Terry said. He sounded so serious, so different from his bantering tone of only a minute ago, that Rose looked up. "Al gave it to me this morning, while you were still asleep."

"Who was it from?"

"My friend Rick," Terry said. "I told you about him—we were in that acting workshop together. He got this part, he says. It's a small part, and anyway the movie's got a tiny budget, it's independently produced. . . ." He stopped. It was almost as if he couldn't go on.

"Yes?" Rose said, uncertain what he wanted from her. "Are you jealous?"

"Not jealous exactly," Terry said. "I thought I was going to be, though. You know how when you stub your toe it takes a while for the pain to

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hit you? That's how I felt, waiting for some kind of feeling. I felt—I don't know—left out. There's all kinds of things going on down there, and here I am, in this town no one's ever heard of. Not that I don't like it here," he said quickly.

"I think it's great here," Rose said. "What more could you ask for?"

"Everything," Terry said. She looked at him sharply and he laughed, but she wondered what he was thinking.

"So guess what?" Vicki said over the insistent whispering of the long distance phone line. It had only taken Rose a few tries to reach Los Angeles. "I used it."

"Used what?" Rose said.

"Used what?" Vicki said. "The potion, what else?"

"You used the love potion?" Rose asked Vicki. Terry, who was passing through the reception room, stopped and looked at her.

"Yeah," Vicki said.

"On who?"

"This guy. Paul."

"Did it work?"

"Oh, yeah," Vicki said. "He's madly in love with me."

"But how do you know he wouldn't have fallen in love with you anyway?"

"Are you kidding?" Vicki said. "We're talking about a guy who paid no attention to me whatsoever until I dumped the stuff in his coffee. Now he's all over me. Maybe you should give yours to Terry."

"Naw," Rose said. "We don't need it." As soon as she said it she wished she hadn't. She didn't mean to imply that they were somehow superior to Vicki, that Vicki could only find love with the help of a potion.

When she hung up Terry said, "Vicki has a love potion?"

"Yeah," Rose said. "I have one too. Want to try it?"

"No," Terry said.

"Seaside Hotel, good morning," Rose said into her headphone.

"I'm coming to visit," the voice at the other end said.

"Vicki?"

"Yeah. Hi. I've got to get out of Los Angeles."

"What happened?"

"I broke up with Paul."

"You did? Why?"

"I couldn't stand it," Vicki said. "He was all over me. Wanted to stay over, to move in together, to get married, to raise a family together . . . he had our future planned into the next century. He wouldn't give me any space, as we say in Los Angeles."

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"We'd be happy to have you—" Rose said.

"Well, that's the thing," Vicki said. "I've only got enough money for the train ride. Could you—Can I stay with you guys?"

"We can do even better than that," Rose said. "We can put you up in a room of your own."

"Really?"

"Sure," Rose said. "There's always a vacancy, and the owner never knows what the hell is going on. We're practically running the place. And wait'll you see the town. You'll love it here."

"Vicki's coming to visit," Rose said to Terry that evening. "I told her we'd be able to give her a room."

"Probably," Terry said. "Sure."

"What's wrong?" Rose asked. "You sound worried. If there aren't any vacancies—"

"I'm fine," Terry said.

"Are you sure—"

"No," Terry said. "No, I'm not sure. I don't know. I've been thinking that maybe—maybe I want to go back to Los Angeles."

"You do?" Rose said. "Why?"

"Well, because of what we were talking about," Terry said. "When we were wondering what was going to happen to us. All of a sudden I started thinking about how I ended up here, fixing someone's bathtub in a town I never even heard of a few months ago. I mean, I was supposed to be an actor. I still want to be an actor. There's not much chance of me getting any parts up here."

"It's because of Rick, isn't it?" Rose said. "Because he got that part in the movie."

"Well, a little," Terry said. "But mostly it's—Remember when I said I thought that beauty was change? I feel I'm stagnating here. I could end up doing this for the rest of my life and not be too unhappy, but I'd know I was missing something. There isn't much for me here."

"I thought you liked this town."

"You do, I know," he said. "But I think you'd like it anywhere. You even liked L.A. Sometimes I think you're too—I don't know—too accepting. Too passive."

"What do you mean?" she said.

"You never *do* things," he said. "You just react. You might not have even left James if he hadn't left you first."

"Sure I would have," she said. "And I applied for the switchboard operator job. That was doing something."

"Yeah, but you didn't go out and look for it," he said. "It just came to you. That's sort of an example of what I mean. You just drifted up the

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coast and ended up at the first place you stopped. No matter where we wound up you would have accepted it."

"I like to make the best of a situation," she said. "I don't see what's so bad about that."

"Nothing, really," he said. "But I'm not like that. I have to keep pushing, see how far I can get. I want to try acting again."

"Well, okay," she said. "We could go back. I could tell Vicki—"

"No, you stay here," he said. "I know how much you like it here."

She felt it like a blow to her stomach. She sat down on the brass bed, barely hearing him.

"I feel like I've been vegetating," he said. "Now I'm not saying it's your fault. It probably isn't. But ever since I met you—I don't know—my energy's gone, disappeared. I've lost my edge. If I go back to L.A. with you I won't be able to compete."

"What are you saying—that you've been too happy with me?" she said. "You need to be miserable in order to act?"

"No—I don't know," he said. "Look, I'm sorry. I just think I should go back to L.A. It has nothing to do with you."

He didn't look any different. That was the thing she couldn't get over, that he had changed so radically and there was no trace of it on the outside. He should have looked like someone out of *Attack of the Mushroom People*, taken over by something alien, foreign.

"Of course it has something to do with me," she said. "You just got done telling me how I was sapping your energy—"

"I didn't say—"

"You listen to me," she said angrily. "There's something more to this than what you've been telling me. If you just wanted to act we could go back to L.A. together. You want out of the relationship, and you're too much of a coward to say so. You're using acting as an excuse."

"No, I—"

"Forget that," she said. She opened the door and slammed it behind her. Passive people didn't slam doors, she thought with satisfaction. Then she went downstairs to the switchboard and dialed Vicki's number. Vicki's answering machine clicked on. "Hi, this is Rose," she said after the beep. "Could you come out here as soon as possible?"

Rose waited at the station as Vicki's train came in. Only three people got off. Rose went over to Vicki and they hugged, and then Vicki pulled back. "You don't look too good," she said.

"I don't feel so good," Rose said. "Is that all the luggage you have?" Vicki was carrying a small suitcase with a designer label Rose didn't recognize.

"Yeah," Vicki said. They went out to the car.

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"So did you try that stuff?" Vicki said as they drove to the hotel. "The potion? It sure as hell worked for me."

Rose took her hand off the steering wheel and ran it through her hair. "I can't," she said. "Vicki, I—Well, what we had was so great because—because it wasn't forced. It just happened, naturally. If I give him the potion, I'll know—all my life I'll know—that he didn't come back to me because he wanted to but because I made him. See?"

"No," Vicki said. "All I see is that you want him back and you have a way of getting him back. Why you don't do it is a mystery to me."

"Anyway, we're talking about this potion as though we know it works," Rose said. "I'm still not convinced that Paul wouldn't have fallen in love with you on his own."

"I'm sure," Vicki said. "I just picked the wrong guy, that's all. If I had it to do over again I'd take my time choosing, believe me."

"You can have mine if you want it," Rose said.

"Really?" Vicki said. "You sure?"

"I wouldn't have said it if I wasn't," Rose said.

"Well, great," Vicki said. "There's this sexy guy down the hall from me—"

"I thought you said you'd be more choosy this time," Rose said.

"Right," Vicki said. "I forgot."

Rose parked the car in front of the hotel. "This is it," she said. "Terry's been painting the trim on some of the windows, but I guess he stopped." A few of the window-sills on the first floor had been painted a restful blue which matched perfectly with the faded gray.

They walked through the reception room and climbed the scuffed wooden stairs to the second floor. Rose showed Vicki her room.

"Where are you staying?" Vicki said.

"Just a few rooms down," Rose said. "Come on, I'll show you." She walked Vicki down the hall. "See the way the wall's made of wood until about waist-high, and then it changes to wallpaper?" she said. "That's called a dado. Al told me that."

"Is that wallpaper?" Vicki said. "You can barely see it under the dirt."

"This place must have been beautiful once," Rose said. She unlocked the door to her room and they went inside.

"Two beds?" Vicki said.

"He brought the cot in when he decided he was going to leave," Rose said. "He's only staying until Al gives us our next paycheck."

"What an asshole," Vicki said. "Why don't you move into my room? Maybe he'll miss you enough to change his mind." She sat on the brass bed and kicked off her shoes.

"I don't want to play games like that," Rose said, sitting next to her. "Either he changes his mind or he doesn't."

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"It's all games," Vicki said. "I still think you're an idiot not to use the potion."

"Oh, right," Rose said. "I was going to give it to you." She got up and went to the heavy wooden desk she had been using as a dresser. Her jewelry box was in the second drawer. "I forgot how blue this is," she said, taking out the small bottle and holding it up to the light. "I had a Siamese cat with eyes that color once."

"You're sure you don't want it?" Vicki said.

"No, that's all right," Rose said. "Here."

"This time I'll use it on the right person," Vicki said, taking the bottle. "You'll see."

The door opened. "Oh, hi," Terry said, sounding embarrassed. Vicki put the bottle behind her, on the bed. "I didn't know you'd be back so soon. I only came in to get my screwdriver. Hi, Vicki."

Does he really look furtive, or is that only the way I want him to look? Rose thought. He should know that he's doing something wrong. But maybe, from his point of view, everything's just fine.

Terry looked through the tool box Al had given him, took what he wanted and left.

"He's certainly changed," Vicki said.

"He's got a lot on his mind," Rose said.

"You know what I can't get over?" Vicki said. "The way you defend him all the time. Here's this jerk who suddenly, with no warning whatsoever, decides to leave you. Maybe he does have a lot on his mind, but that's still no excuse. He's still an asshole."

"I'm not defending him—"

"Though now that I think of it you stuck up for that asshole James too," Vicki said.

"Well, even James had his good points," Rose said. "He made me laugh."

"You see?" Vicki said. "There you go again."

"It's just that there's no point in dwelling on the past," Rose said. "Okay, so James treated me badly, I see that now, but you don't have to bring it up every time we get together. And from now on you're going to bring up how unfriendly you thought Terry was. I like to remember the good times. There were a lot of good times with Terry. There were even some with James."

"Not very many."

"You're doing it again," Rose said.

"Okay, I'm sorry," Vicki said. "I won't bring either one of them up again. I keep forgetting what an incurable romantic you are."

"I may be incurable," Rose said, "but I think I'm in remission now."

* * *

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The night before Terry was to leave they ate together in the restaurant. Rose had been prepared to insist on it, but Terry had agreed quickly enough. Vicki came along, too, to be a buffer, Rose had said. "Okay," Vicki said. "But I'm not going to talk to that jerk."

The neon window glowed behind them as Lynne came to take their order. Suddenly Rose remembered the time Lynne had talked to Terry for five minutes while customers lined up behind her, waiting to be seated. Terry could talk to anyone; once, in Los Angeles, he had dialed information to find out the number of a movie theater and was still on the phone an hour later. They had missed the movie that night.

"I'll just have a cup of coffee," Rose said.

"How come you're not having ice cream?" Vicki asked. "Are you on a diet?"

"No," Rose said. "I'm just—I'm not very hungry."

"Well, then, I'll just have coffee, too," Terry said.

"Okay, me, too," Vicki said. "And a dish of chocolate ice cream."

"You know, I was thinking," Rose said after the waitress had taken their order. "Maybe you'd better take the car. You know how hard it is to get around in L.A. without one."

"No, that's okay," Terry said. "I'll be all right."

"How are you going to get down the coast?" Rose said.

"I'll hitch a ride," Terry said.

"You're sure?" Rose said.

Vicki looked disgusted. "I'll go get us the coffee," she said.

Terry nodded. "I'll be fine," he said. He watched as Vicki went to talk to the waitress.

Rose couldn't think of anything more to say. This was Terry, the man she had laughed and talked with for hours during the trip up the coast. Friends of theirs had been astonished when she'd told them they were going to be driving for days in a car with no radio. "You're going to kill each other by the end," one of them had said.

Vicki came back with the cups and set one down in front of each of them. The neon lights reflected on the coffee like the sun shining on dirty oil. No, only Terry's coffee looked funny, almost blue. Rose snapped her head up to Vicki. "This time I'll use it on the right person," Vicki had said. "You'll see."

Terry hadn't reached for his coffee yet. There was still time to take it, to pretend she thought it was hers. "I've got to go to the bathroom," Vicki said. "I'll be back in a minute." Terry blew on the coffee to cool it and took a sip.

"You look good today," Terry said into the silence.

"Thanks," Rose said. She felt like shuddering. Did it work so fast then? "What time are you leaving tomorrow?"

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"I thought early in the morning," Terry said. "Damn, I hate to get up early. Why don't I stay here a little longer? Old Mrs. Mann still needs her ceiling plastered."

"No," Rose said. "I think you should go."

"You know what?" Terry said, taking another sip of his coffee. "I don't want to go. It was a crazy idea to begin with. I mean, who am I kidding? If I was going to make it as an actor I would have done it a long time ago."

"I think you should go," Rose said again.

He didn't hear her. "I don't know what I was thinking of," he said. "I mean, here we have something together that's so great, that's better than being in a hundred movies, and I was going to give that up. I must have been out of my mind."

"Excuse me," Rose said. "I have to go to the bathroom."

Vicki stood touching up her blusher in front of the bathroom mirror. "I told you I didn't want to use it," Rose said.

"You didn't seem all that anxious to stop me," Vicki said.

"Stop you?" Rose said. "How could I stop you when I didn't even know what you were doing?"

"You knew," Vicki said. She studied her face in the mirror, nodded as if satisfied with what she saw, and snapped the blusher shut.

"You didn't even ask me."

"That's because I knew you wouldn't let me do it," Vicki said, zipping up her black leather bag. "Ever since I've known you you've sat back and let things happen to you. This way at least you take some control over your life."

"*I'm* not the one who's taken control," Rose said. "You're the one who's decided what's best for me and then gone and done it."

"You still don't understand—"

"No, *you* don't understand. Sometimes the only way to control your life is to accept it."

"You see, you're doing it again—"

"But you're right about one thing," Rose said. "I am going to have to make a decision. I'm going to have to leave Terry, and leave this town, and do it quickly so he won't be able to follow me. I'm not going to be able to live with him knowing he was tricked into something."

"I was only—"

Rose closed the door gently behind her as she left. ●

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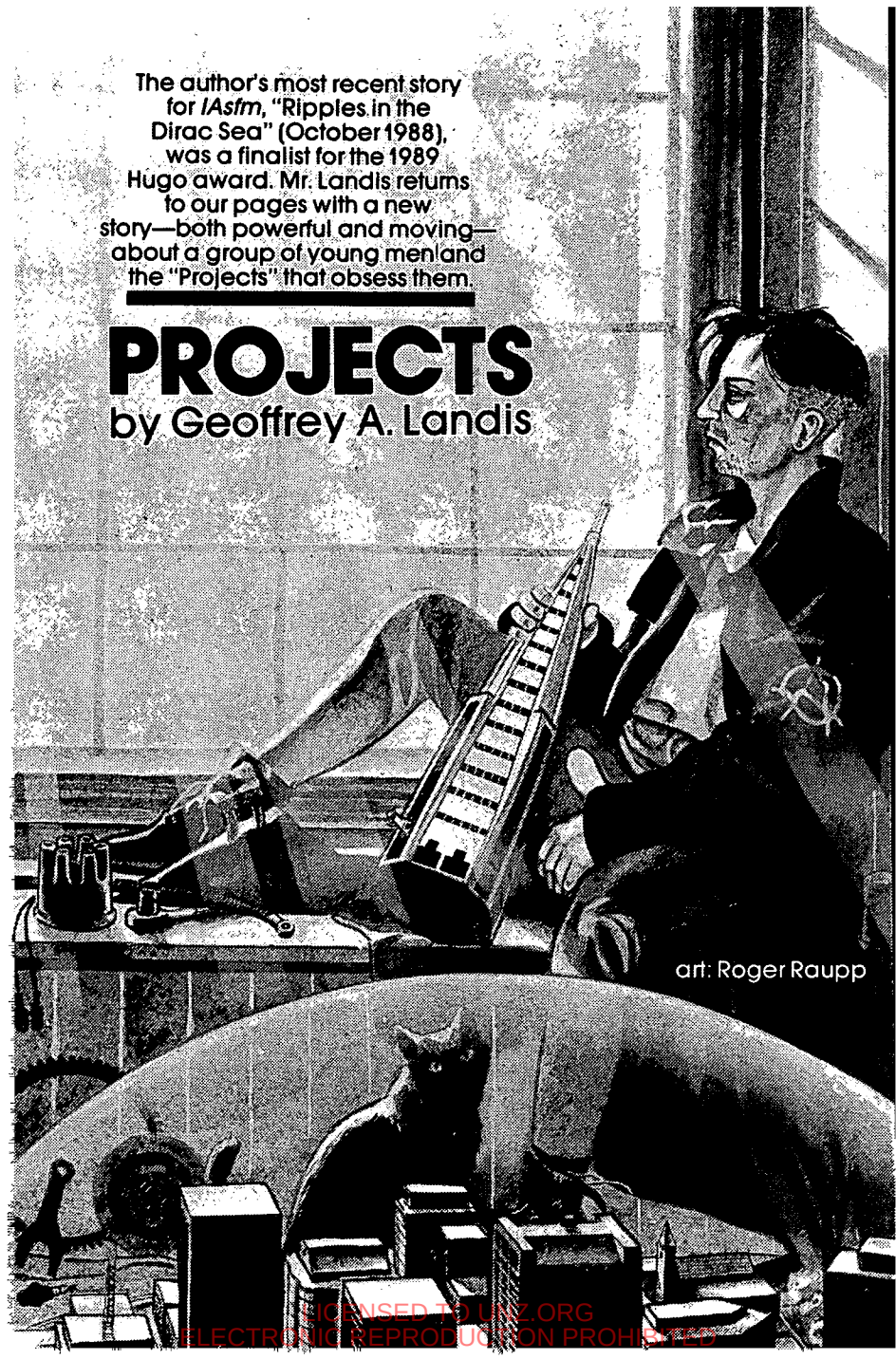
The author's most recent story for *IAsfm*, "Ripples in the Dirac Sea" (October 1988), was a finalist for the 1989 Hugo award. Mr. Landis returns to our pages with a new story—both powerful and moving—about a group of young men and the "Projects" that obsess them.

PROJECTS

by Geoffrey A. Landis



art: Roger Raupp

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Ben dangled his feet over the side of the ledge and looked out across the Charles at the sunset. The day was breezy and cool, with sailboats zipping briskly up and down the basin. Across the river, Boston skyscrapers were gold-plated by the October sun.

Fifty feet below, none of the people walking along Memorial Drive even looked up. The ledge around the top floor of Walker Memorial was plenty wide, hardly a challenge, but Ben liked it for the view. It was a good place to sit and meditate.

After a while Rat came walking down the ledge, carrying a burger and a Coke from Pritchett. He was crazy, but then Ben figured that all of his friends were crazy. Everybody worth knowing was crazy.

"Hey ya, Benjy."

"Hey yourself, Rat."

Rat walked over and sat down crosslegged next to Ben. Ben reached over and grabbed a handful of his fries. The catsup was mixed half-and-half with tabasco—a trick Rat had taken up to discourage moochers—but Ben was so used to it he was starting to prefer them that way.

"Got the midterm projects back today." Rat—his full name was Jacob Ratjszek, which he hated—was in architecture. His midterm design had been a study for a plastic skyscraper, made rigid like a balloon by its own internal pressure. He'd worked on it for weeks.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. 'Good imagination, but unrealistic. B+.' And a note: 'please do something more practical for your final project.' "

"Bummer."

"Fucking professor thinks I'm a twerp."

"You mean you're not?" Ben regretted it the moment he said it.

"Damn right I'm a twerp. I've got twerp written all over me. But just one thing, Benj. I'm one twerp that these guys are god damn going to *remember*."

Ben, Rat, and another student, Trenton Haverford, lived together in half a house in Cambridgeport. It was old, run down, with peeling paint and warped floors and in a less-than-nice neighborhood; but it was big, close enough to the Institute to walk, and not half as expensive as most of the apartments around Cambridge.

The landlord was a medical intern whose hobby was collecting art deco. His wife raised Dobermans. The kitchen was her province, fenced off from the rest of the house, and filled with Doberman puppies. On Sunday afternoons she would invite poor starving students down for samples of bread, cookies, or whatever she was baking.

Rat and Trenton had two old Jaguars, bought from a junkyard wrecked and rusted, one bashed in from the front and the other from the back.

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They'd cut the frames apart halfway and welded them together. Covered with a tarp, the car frame sat up on blocks back behind the house, under an abandoned grape arbor, waiting for some day to come when they'd find time to work on the body. In the living room, engine parts were spread across the floor, across every chair, couch, table. Neither one of them had worked on it in months. They'd never get around to finishing it. That was yesterday's project; today's project was always newer, more exciting.

It was a crazy house.

Ben was course eight—physics. Trenton and Rat were both in Architecture and Urban Planning. Trent was tall, blond, handsome, and quiet, Rat was short and Jewish and quirky. Ben figured himself for somewhere in the middle. He'd roomed with Rat his freshman year, and when they decided to go together on an apartment, Trent was a natural choice for a third. Trent was in the Urban Planning concentration, working on a combined masters. He'd picked Professor Tormic for an advisor.

"Man, you have got to be out of your mind," Ben had said. "The Tor has got a reputation a mile wide. He never cuts *anybody* any slack."

"Aw, he's all right," Trent said, "if you know how to handle him."

"Yeah? How's that?"

"Well, first thing is, you gotta be ready to work your ass off."

"Right."

"No, Tormic's cool. Hell, he's the only Professor in the 'tute that comes to all the grad student parties, let alone comes with some woman he just picked up at a bar."

"Yeah, right. Good reason to work for the guy."

Trent shrugged. "Well, that and the fact that he's brilliant."

Trent was the only one who had a regular girlfriend, Mary, a chemical engineering major from Connecticut. She was rather cute, in her own way—long brown hair and a taste for dressing in blue cotton shifts. Trent often spent nights at her apartment. Ben had tried dating one of her roommates for a while. He'd thought they were hitting it off pretty well, but when he'd tried to make a move, she'd let him know where he stood real fast. "You guys are just too weird for words, you know? Like, you guys are kinda interesting to hang around with sometimes, but not on a day-to-day basis, okay? Frankly, I don't see how Mary deals with it."

If Rat ever had any interest in women, he never mentioned it.

When Ben came in the next day, he found Rat lying on the floor in the living room, looking on in amusement as the King of Nigeria stalked a sheet of transparent mylar that hung suspended in the air over the heating vent. Niger was stock still, only the tip of his tail twitching

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occasionally. The mylar rippled and twisted with the passing air currents. Rat was cooking something up, thought Ben; he could tell by the speculative look in his eye.

Trent was in his room, scrutinizing a long spool of chart-recorder output spread across the floor. He had chart recorder output taped up across every wall of his room, results of geological measurements he'd taken over the last few weeks.

"What's up, Trent?" asked Ben, tossing his jacket onto the pile at the end of the hall.

Trent looked up with a grin. "Good news, that's what. Tormic says he thinks we have enough to publish. Our conclusions are pretty radical, but he says we'd better publish before somebody else makes the same jump. I'm getting it ready to submit for *Urban Studies Review*."

"Hey, good for you. Go for it!"

The walls of Rat's room were covered with drawings and photos of buildings. Half of them showed skyscrapers. The other half were domes: sports arenas, churches, inflated tennis domes, observatories; covers from science-fiction books showing the cities of the future, with segmented domes rising from the plain like half-buried crystal balls.

"A dome is a competition between materials strength and gravity," said Rat.

In the middle of their living room, clearing aside the engine parts, Rat had put up a five-foot square scale model of Boston. Trent had made it for a wind-tunnel project long ago, but Rat took it over as his own. He had put a dome over the city, made from ultra-thin plastic. The model was in front of the bay window. When the sun struck it, the air inside heated and the dome inflated.

It was Rat's project for the design course.

"See, in all the old science fiction, they always have these cities with domes over them, right? But that's stupid, no? Living inside a thing like that would be like being indoors all the time. Dull. People need to get outside sometimes, especially in good weather, don't they?"

"Sure," said Ben, although he knew some people who wouldn't even recognize the sun if they happened to see it one day.

"You really need a dome you can put up in winter, when you need it, and take down in summer, when it's nice, right? So here's my solution: a transparent mylar dome."

"Like the tennis bubble, but transparent?"

"Forget the tennis bubble, Benjy. I'm talking *big* bubble. I'm talking kilometers here. It stays inflated on waste-heat generated by the city. It keeps the heat from escaping, and so you can go outside in winter in your shirtsleeves. In the summer you just roll it up and store it away.

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The savings in snow removal costs alone would pay for it, not to mention the energy savings."

"Pretty clever."

"Damn right it's clever. But I know what he's going to say. 'Imaginative, but not realistic.' Pfagh."

Rat joined him on the porch roof. The skyglow was just beginning to fade, and Venus stood out like a searchlight against the luminous pastel sky. They sat in silence until the stars emerged. It was a pleasant, companionable silence.

"When I was a kid," said Ben, "I used to climb up on the roof of our house, lie down on the shingles, and try and count the stars." Rat said nothing. "Counting stars is tough; it's easy to lose track and count the same ones twice. When that happens you have to start over again from the beginning. And the longer you're out, the more you see." The night was an endless dark and the stars seemed so close that he could almost brush them with his outstretched fingertips. "I used to say the numbers out loud so I wouldn't lose track." Sometimes he would so lose himself in contemplation that he would hear his own voice counting . . . six hundred eighteen, six hundred nineteen, six hundred twenty . . . and for a moment fail to recognize the voice, or what it was saying. "You ever do anything like that, Rat?"

"Nah." A jet crossed the sky, for a moment rivaling Venus in brightness. When its noise had faded away, Rat continued, "Guess I was too busy trying to make rocket engines. Most of them turned out more like bombs, really. Blew out every window in the block, once."

"You know what, Rat? I never did manage to count them."

"Yeah. I know what you mean." They were silent for a while, so long that Ben started to think perhaps Rat had fallen asleep. "You really think they're out there, Benj?"

"Gotta be. A hundred billion stars in the galaxy, Rat. Some of them have just got to be homes of other civilizations. If we haven't seen them, we're just looking in the wrong places. Or listening to the wrong things."

Niger appeared at the window, meowed softly, walked carefully out to rub once against Rat's shoulder, and then bounded out into the night. "Lasers, huh?"

"You got it." There have been SETI—Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence—attempts before. But those projects had listened for radio signals. "Aliens advanced enough to discover the laser wouldn't bother with radio. The wavelength is all wrong—radio waves aren't directional enough to communicate across interstellar distances. Intelligent aliens would use lasers. But nobody's ever tried looking for laser signals. Nobody before us, anyway."

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On weekends Ben went out to Haystack Observatory, where his project team had set up scopes. They searched G IV stars, looking for narrow-band, coherent light. Finding nothing.

"You just do that, Benj. Look for your aliens. And I bet you'll find them. Someday. Me, I'm going to do what I've always wanted to do."

"Which is?"

"Make tall buildings."

Early November the weather turned cool and foggy. Ben's observatory session was postponed. He wandered over to Urban Planning to see if Trent was in his office. He was expounding on his project to a pair of mystified undergraduate assistants.

"It's like this," said Trent. "The continental plates are moving, right? The Atlantic Ocean is getting wider, and it's shoving the Eastern Seaboard up into the Allegheny mountains. The plate is being pushed on the right; it's pinned on the left; and so a whole load of compressive stress builds up. Like this." He put his hands together, palm to palm, and pushed. "Now, turns out the Boston basin is a paleozoic caldera. The city itself is built smack dab center on the extinct volcano's throat, a big granite plug. And the pressure is squeezing on the plug." He made a popping sound. "Just like a watermelon seed. But, in this case, it squirts down. Boston's starting to sink."

"Come on. If Boston were sinking, wouldn't other people have noticed by now?"

Trent shrugged. "Nobody's gonna find what nobody looks for."

"Then how do *you* know?" asked Ben.

"Seismic tomography. The boss managed to borrow a machine over a weekend." He grinned. "He's a slave driver, but there are advantages in having a boss who's got connections with the oil companies. The data's noisy, but when you know what to look for, it's there. Now, the way I see it, the Boston civil authorities take the ostrich approach. Obviously, that's only going to work for a limited amount of time. This is a long-term thing; the city is going to sink for the next century. Boston is traditionally a city built on landfill, but there's got to be a limit to how much you can keep building a city up. It would be interesting, wouldn't it? Every ten years or so they'd have to raise all the streets, and the first floors of all the buildings become basements, while the basements become submerged."

Boston sinking. It seemed unreal and far away, nothing concerned with the solid, vibrant city Ben knew. "So what do you think they should do about it?"

"Personally, you mean? Just abandon the place. Heck, move the Institute down to Florida or somewhere, and what's Boston got worth keep-

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ing, anyway? Just a bunch of old houses, and a couple of skyscrapers that are going to fall over anyway. Let it sink."

The undergraduate assistants looked appropriately shocked.

"But, of course, you can't put that into a thesis," said Trent.

Ben laughed.

"Benjy—are you in on this hack?" asked Rat. "All I can tell you is that it's big. It's real big."

"Will it take a lot of time?"

"Couple of weeks, maybe," said Rat.

"Can't, then. Next week we have Haystack scheduled for twelve-hour runs, and after that I'll be up to my ass in data."

"Okay, but you'll regret it, I guarantee you."

"Are you really hard up for people?"

"No, I got lots of volunteers. I just thought you'd want to be in on it."

"Can't be helped, Rat. Sorry." Ben looked at him for a moment. "Say, this isn't going to be another *Synthesis of Phenylated Methyl-ethylamines*, is it? You could get in a lot of trouble."

"Hey, no way. I swore off that. Besides, this one's legal. Well, almost legal. Most of it, anyway."

Synthesis had been a science-fair project back in high school. He'd won the local science fair and was well on his way to winning the city-wide when three men wearing charcoal grey suits and sunglasses showed up and confiscated his display. Apparently someone had finally figured out that "Phenylated Methyl-ethylamines" was a euphemism for amphetamines. They'd taken him to the local police station and asked him questions for three hours, but eventually let him off with a warning. Rat claimed that he'd never used the stuff he made; Ben believed him, since Rat was so wired naturally that using speed would have been like putting salt on the ocean. Ben figured that he'd probably just been amused by the prospect of playing his teachers for fools.

"Yeah, right."

Rat spread his hands and grinned. "What can I say? I've got a rep."

"Tormic is up for tenure next week," said Trenton.

Rat kept scribbling away and mumbling to himself. Ben looked up. "Trouble?"

"Nah. They'll give him a hard time, but he'll make it. The man's obnoxious, but you gotta see that he's fucking brilliant."

"Yeah?"

The summer before they found their place in Cambridgeport, Ben and Rat had both stayed at the Institute. Trent had gone back to Chicago;

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he'd found a summer job as a junior assistant in the Mayor's city planning office. Ben stayed in the dorm. Rat didn't have enough money saved to pay for a dorm room; instead he set up a tent on the roof of building 24. The door that led to the roof was kept chained and padlocked, but Rat had sawed through one of the links of the chain, replacing it with one that looked identical but could be twisted open and shut. The tent lines he tied to vents and other protrusions; the stakes he welded into the roof itself by melting the tar with a hot-air gun. There was a bathroom on the top floor, but after it was dark he didn't bother, urinating off the side of the roof into the courtyard forty feet below.

Friday evening some enterprising hacker had crashed the network. The net mainframe responded to all commands with the same misspelled message: "HEY NERD! IT'S FRIDAY NIGHT. WHY AREN'T YOU OUT HAAVING A GOOD TIME?" User services couldn't say how long it would take to purge the system. Ben decided that it was as good a time as any to heed the message. He looked at the posters in the lobby and found a mixer in the Sala.

The party was a dud. Soggy tasteless pretzels and wax-paper cups with punch the color of radiator antifreeze and music played so loud as to make any chance of conversation impossible. The girls mostly sat around in groups of three or four. Makes it rather hard to go up and ask one to dance, Ben thought—you keep thinking, won't all her friends think I'm insulting them? If one girl won't dance, he felt kinda silly asking the next—what do they think, that he sees them as commodities? All the same?

Ben did one dance, but the girl nodded and headed off. No interest at all. He looked around one more time and split for a friend's house.

When he got there, they were having a party of their own. Bob was strumming his guitar, Trent accompanying him on one of those little plastic recorders. Mary was with him. Ben expected her to be happy that Trent's attention, for once, was on something other than his project, but she didn't look very happy.

The fireplace was burning wood scrounged from dumpsters all around the Institute, mostly loading pallets and shipping crates. Occasionally bits of paint would sizzle up in colors, releasing a quick burst of odor.

Trenton was well on his way to oblivion. His paper had been rejected by *Urban Studies Review*. "A disappointment, but they're choosy. We're sending it to *Geology Transactions*; they're *sure* to accept it."

The building 10 ledge was narrow, but if you followed it around there was a wide niche where you could sit and have lunch. When Ben reached

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it, Rat was already there. As he sat down, Rat reached over and grabbed some of his fries.

Trent never went out on ledges. Once they'd offered to show him around the Walker ledge, as wide as a sidewalk and at least as safe. He just looked out the window and smiled. "Sorry, guys. I'm not into suicide."

From where they were sitting, they looked out across rooftops: weathered green brass, flat gravel, forests of ventilation ducts separated by the occasional skylight. Rat waved his hand out at it. "Looks pretty real, doesn't it?"

"Why shouldn't it look real?"

"So how do you know that this is the real world and not a computer simulation?"

"Too high resolution for a computer simulation."

Rat shrugged. "Yeah? So it's a really *detailed* computer simulation."

"Not damn likely. *You're* in it. No computer could ever come up with a world with something as unlikely as you in it."

"Yeah, right. So how do *I* know that it isn't a simulation?"

"It's got *me* in it."

"And how do you know that *you're* not a computer simulation, too?"

"Because—" Ben paused. "I don't know. How *do* I know I'm not a simulation?"

Rat shrugged. "You could try jumping."

Ben looked down. "No thanks. If I am just a simulation, I think I'd just as soon not know it."

Minnesota was too far for Ben to fly home for Thanksgiving. Trent's parents were vacationing in Europe, and Rat never went home for holidays, so the three of them and Mary rented bicycles and pedaled down to Cape Cod. The water was far too cold to swim, but Rat did anyway, stripping down, shouting "Banzai!" and diving in; then immediately running out to shiver by the bonfire Trent and Mary had made from driftwood. When the fire burned down a bit, Trent wrapped the turkey in aluminum foil to roast in the coals. Trent and Mary shared a blanket and sang Beatles songs off key as the turkey cooked, while Rat, uncharacteristically silent, huddled close to the fire, wrapped up in three winter coats. Feeling left-out, Ben walked down the beach, gathering more driftwood for the fire. It was well past sunset before Trent pronounced the bird done to satisfaction.

Trent and Mary shared one tent while Ben and Rat put up a tent of Rat's own design, a geodesic dome of graphite rods and iridescent plastic sheet which he claimed was half the bulk and a third the weight of a standard tent.

Sometime after midnight a storm whipped up. Rat's dome began to

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whistle and then, with a nearly ultrasonic twang, shredded. Ben grabbed his sleeping bag and dashed for the other tent, startling the heck out of Trent and Mary, who had slept through the whole thing. Rat chased down the beach after the tent poles. "Hey! That's a hundred bucks worth of graphite rods! Help me catch them! Hey, it's not funny, you guys!"

In the morning, it was cool and overcast, but had stopped raining. Ben and Rat took a bus back to Boston with their bikes and the remains of Rat's tent, while Trent and Mary cycled on down to Provincetown.

The end of November, Ben's research project hit gold. One of the nights when Ben was supervising the optical coherence survey, an undergraduate assistant was puzzled by an anomaly in the scan spectrum. When Ben checked it out, the source showed characteristics of coherent light. It emanated from somewhere near a star known only by a number, DB-4223B, a G subgiant fifty-seven light years from Earth.

"Likely star for life?" asked Rat.

"Who knows?" Ben shrugged. "Actually, we weren't even supposed to be looking at subgiants in the first place—we were aiming at main sequence stars. This one got on the list by mistake. But then, who knows what type of stars are even likely to have planets? This one's as good a bet as any, I suppose."

"He's obsessed, Ben," said Mary. "You talk to him. He's impossible to live with. I just can't take it anymore, it's been that bad lately."

"Yeah, sometimes I know just what you mean. He's having a hard time, you know."

"I know, but it's just too intense for me. Does he have to be so obsessive about it? Couldn't he relax, just for a few moments every now and then? I can't deal with it. I can't, I really can't."

By the beginning of December, Rat hardly came home at all. He was always working on his project. When he came in, he was usually on the phone. "You sure that they don't guard the helicopters at night? Okay, good. Do we have backup pilots for the other four?"

Ben tried not to even wonder what he was up to.

His own project was in high gear, working twenty-hour days. They were constantly excited. It was clear that they'd found a laser in the sky, a huge one. It was putting out, Ben's professor calculated, as much power in a day as had been generated by all the power plants on the Earth since the beginning of civilization. But it didn't seem to be *doing* anything—the power wasn't modulated, it didn't even seem to be narrowly focused. It just *was*.

After a long session at Haystack trying to nail down the signal, Ben

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came home just before dawn. Trenton was still up, pacing back and forth around the living room. He was white. "I can't believe it. I can't believe it. They denied him tenure."

After a while Ben got Trent coherent enough to tell the story. The tenure committee hadn't actually denied tenure to Tormic; what they had done was only to push the decision off to the next year. Apparently Tormic's research had been beyond question, but they had heard bad things about his teaching. And his research focus didn't really match the department's main interests—they hinted, without quite saying anything outright, that he might find himself happier if he found a spot on a geology faculty. He could try for tenure again next year, except—

Except that he'd lost his cool. He insulted the tenure committee "—a gaggle of worn-out has-beens and never-wasses, with turds for brains—" and the department "—morons who couldn't see breakthrough research if it raped their sister and stole their wallet." They were jealous of his brains, he'd said to Trent. Well, he didn't need that bunch of jerks anyway. If he picked up a phone, he could have his choice of a dozen other offers in an hour. According to Trent, Tormic had gone on insulting the committee, in excruciating detail, for half an hour. At the end of it they didn't need to fire him—he'd quit.

The next day his office was already empty. A good-bye note was painted on the door in Wite-Out: "Starting at Amoco Monday. So long, suckers!"

Trent was rather depressed all the next week. It was four in the morning when Ben came in, and Trent was sitting at his desk, staring at his papers. In half an hour he still hadn't moved. Ben was almost afraid to talk to him, but more afraid not to.

"How's it going?"

"Okay," said Trent, without looking up.

"Thesis going all right?"

"Maybe."

"Well?"

"Got a committee," he said. He put down his calculator, pushed back his chair, and looked up at Ben. "They want me to give an informal presentation to fill them in on what I'm working on, next week. They seem pretty sympathetic. I think it'll go all right. I'm just a little nervous, that's all."

"Well, good luck, then."

"Yeah." Trent pushed his chair back toward his desk and bent back to work.

After three weeks of observation and analysis, they finally concluded that Ben's laser signal was no more than a natural optical maser oper-

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ating in a supernova gas shell, a phenomenon that had been predicted by an obscure Russian astrophysicist back in the late sixties, but never before seen. Still, that was more of a discovery than most students ever made. It was plenty for a thesis.

Rat spent all his time listening to the weather radio, plotting fronts and isobars on a plastic map of the United States. He was nervous. His final architecture project had been due a week ago. He'd gotten an extension, but that wouldn't last forever. He told Ben he had the paper written, though he didn't volunteer to show it. The class required not only a paper, but a model. "Not yet," he said, but he didn't seem to be working on anything. He just sat on the floor stroking the cat and watching the Weather Channel.

Mary didn't say where she'd gone. Her roommates said that she'd just packed up and left. The Institute only knew that she hadn't registered for classes for next term. When Trent tried to call her family, they hung up on him. She'd left a note in purple felt-tip ink:

"I have to leave for a while. I've got to get away, get some time by myself to think things through. I'm sorry. Maybe I'll see you in September, okay? Maybe things will work out."

The night was crisp and clear, the stars brilliant in a velvet sky. Ben wished that he could be out observing, instead of having to head home to work on his thesis. When Ben got in, he could hear Rat on the phone: ". . . . the front moved through last night. Another front is coming in tomorrow afternoon, it should drop a couple of inches of snow. As soon as we hear from the weather service, we're *go* for tonight, four A.M."

"They dumped my thesis," said Trent. "I can't fucking believe it! They called it science fiction. Told me to get back to the real world. They want me to start a new project. Jesus, a new project! I'm almost through, and they want me to start over again."

"Bummer," said Ben.

The dome went up over the Institute on a calm winter night two days into finals period. It was a military operation, zero hour four A.M. The dome itself was twelve tons of mylar, suspended under a skyhook helicopter. Compressed air cannisters blew it open, and four smaller and more maneuverable Army helicopters snagged the main tension lines as it slowly settled over the Institute. Rat's ground team grabbed the anchor cables, stretched them out to inch-thick steel eye-bolts that had been emplaced in quick-set concrete the previous night, and winched them to the specified tension. Another team released a controlled volume of he-

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lium between the two sheets to hold it in position until the sun rose and the greenhouse effect took over. Ben wondered how he'd managed to keep an operation that big so secret.

"The key rule of life," said Rat. "Never *ask* first, for it is always easier to get forgiveness than permission."

It was like a warm summer day inside, while snow swirled outside.

It was huge. It was magnificent. The headline in the *Globe*: "Doming the Dome: Tech Students Do it Again." In the *Herald-American*: "Saran-wrapped Science." The instant dome was on the front pages of a hundred newspapers, the latest and most audacious student caper from a school well known for technological pranks.

Rat wasn't there to enjoy his triumph. Ben finally found where he'd gone when he returned home late, and the phone was ringing. It was Rat, calling from jail.

It turned out that Rat had used a fake Institute purchase order to buy the materials—a rather major item, since he had used nearly a hundred thousand dollars worth of mylar alone. He was also being held by the feds, who had been less than thrilled when it appeared that the helicopters used had been "borrowed" from the National Guard.

With his usual good fortune, Rat only stayed in jail for a night. The helicopter company turned out to be his benefactors; their publicity department wanted to feature the dome for a TV ad, and it wouldn't do to have the builder in jail. They paid his bail and convinced the others that, all in all, it would be better if the theft charges were just quietly forgotten.

Geology Transactions rejected Trent's paper. "The settling of Boston is well known, and is already adequately accounted for by gradual compression of land fill. Data is interesting, but does not support such a far-reaching conclusion."

Late that night, Trent broke into Tormic's empty office and brought in a tank of liquid nitrogen. He taped plastic over the ventilation grill and around the door and chugged down a fifth of Jack Daniel's while the nitrogen boil-off slowly displaced the air in the office. No mess, no pain.

The dome lasted about a month before it tore away in a strong wind. It was beginning to get dusty anyway. The Institute had already started making plans for a stronger one next year, bigger, financed by the money they would save on heating and snow removal.

It was a warm day in March, and the ice was finally breaking up in the river. Ben was looking across at Boston, trying to see it as Trent might have, transformed into a city of canals. After a while, Rat joined him on the ledge.

"You still think you'll find your aliens?"

"Eventually. Or else they'll find us."

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They sat in silence.

"I look at Boston," Ben said, "and all I see is your dome. Thin plastic, glistening in the sunlight."

"Forget that. That's history. It'll never happen in Boston, anyway—the prof was right about that all along. Too conservative. Tall buildings, that's where the action is. You know Frank Lloyd Wright's mile high skyscraper? Forget it! Technologically obsolete. Why think small? With composite fibers and dynamic control, I figure that we could build one *ten* kilometers tall, easy! Imagine it, will you?" He held out his arms.

Ben shook his head and smiled.

Ben kept the only remaining copy of Trent's thesis. It must have been when he and Rat moved out of the apartment that it got lost.

At any rate, he looked for it, but couldn't find it the next year, when Boston began to sink. ●

NEAT STUFF

(Continued from page 63)

Though the film focuses on the interplay between the nanny and the parents, there are some unusual special effects, with the demon tree being the most important. It was constructed by Production Designer Gregg Fonesca, who worked on the original *A Nightmare on Elm Street* and last summer's big Disney hit, *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids.*

Fonesca's team built a three-story tree that dominates the mysterious part of the forest Seagrove's nanny often disappears into. The steel structure is twelve feet in diameter, and hydraulics enable it to move in a realistic way. This a no rubber tree out of *The Wizard of Oz.* "When this tree moves," Fonesca said, "you hear the wood splintering."

Outside of the woods, Fonesca has tried to capture the very normalcy of the couple's life—the better to increase the horror that threatens them. "We started with the concept that this was a good horror story about ordinary people," Fonesca said. "They are becoming assimilated into the pop culture of California—but at the same time—they are not losing the values of home, hearth, and children. So in detailing their environment we stress that there is nothing out of the ordinary."

Other special effects are being created by Peter Chesney of Image Engineering. John A. Alonzo, who filmed *Chinatown* and *Scarface,* is the cinematographer.

Like William Blatty—who has returned to his roots with *The Exorcist: 1990,* Friedkin is returning to a genre that he helped revive. But Friedkin has given early warning that the effects and shocks in his new film will be an integral part of a story about people . . . and not just a thrill ride of cinematic splatter. ●

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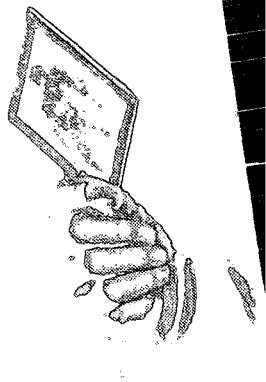
MR. BOY

by James Patrick Kelly

Reshaped humanity, immortality therapy, virtual environment parties, and Panasonic playmates are all a part of James Patrick Kelly's "Mr. Boy." This tale is the newest in a hard-edged and breathless series that has included "Solstice" (June 1985) and "The Prisoner of Chillon" (June 1986). Both stories were highly acclaimed novelettes, and the latter tale was the winner of our first annual Readers' Award.

art: A. C. Farley



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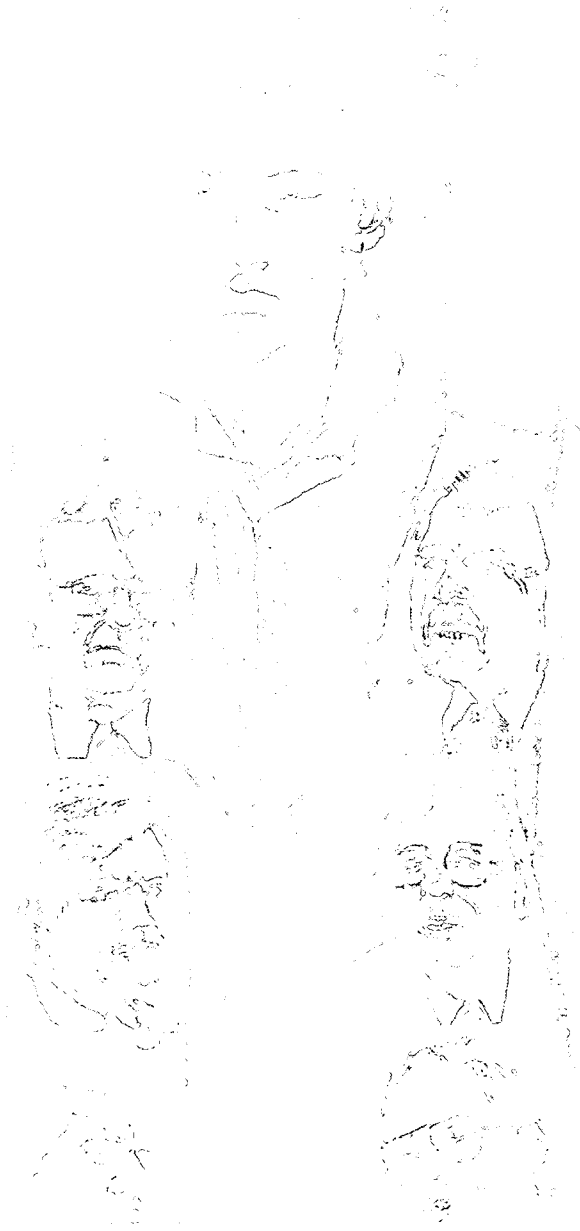

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I was already twitching by the time they strapped me down. Nasty pleasure and beautiful pain crackled through me, branching and re-branching like lightning. Extreme feelings are hard to tell apart when you have endorphins spilling across your brain. Another spasm shot down my legs and curled my toes. I moaned. The stiffs wore surgical masks that hid their mouths, but I knew that they were smiling. They hated me because my mom could afford to have me stunted. When I really was just a kid I did not understand that. Now I hated them back; it helped me get through the therapy. We had a very clean transaction going here. No secrets between us.

Even though it hurts, getting stunted is still the ultimate flash. As I unlived my life, I overdosed on dying feelings and experiences. My body was not big enough to hold them all; I thought I was going to explode. I must have screamed because I could see the laugh lines crinkling around the stiffs' eyes. You do not have to worry about laugh lines after they twank your genes and reset your mitotic limits. My face was smooth and I was going to be twelve years old forever, or at least as long as Mom kept paying for my rejuvenation.

I giggled as the short one leaned over me and pricked her catheter into my neck. Even through the mask, I could smell her breath. She reeked of dead meat.

Getting stunted always left me wobbly and thick, but this time I felt like last Tuesday's pizza. One of the stiffs had to roll me out of recovery in a wheelchair.

The lobby looked like a furniture showroom. Even the plants had been newly waxed. There was nothing to remind the clients that they were bags of blood and piss. You are all biological machines now, said the lobby, clean as space station lettuce. A scattering of people sat on the hard chairs. Stennie and Comrade were fidgeting by the elevators. They looked as if they were thinking of rearranging the furniture—like maybe into a pile in the middle of the room. Even before they waved, the stiff seemed to know that they were waiting for me.

Comrade smiled. *"Zdrast'ye."*

"You okay, Mr. Boy?" said Stennie. Stennie was a grapefruit yellow stenonychosaurus with a brown underbelly. His razor-clawed toes clicked against the slate floor as he walked.

"He's still a little weak," said the stiff, as he set the chair's parking brake. He strained to act nonchalant, not realizing that Stennie enjoys being stared at. "He needs rest. Are you his brother?" he said to Comrade.

Comrade appeared to be a teenaged spike neck with a head of silky black hair that hung to his waist. He wore a window coat on which twenty-three different talking heads chattered. He could pass for human,

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even though he was really a Panasonic. *"Nyet,"* said Comrade. "I'm just another one of his hallucinations."

The poor stiff gave him a dry nervous cough that might have been meant as a chuckle. He was probably wondering whether Stennie wanted to take me home or eat me for lunch. I always thought that the way Stennie got reshaped was more-funny looking than fierce—a python that had rear-ended an ostrich. But even though he was a head shorter than me, he did have enormous eyes and a mouthful of serrated teeth. He stopped next to the wheelchair and rose up to his full height. "I appreciate everything you've done." Stennie offered the stiff his spindly three-fingered hand to shake. "Sorry if he caused any trouble."

The stiff took it gingerly, then shrieked and flew backwards. I mean, he jumped almost a meter off the floor. Everyone in the lobby turned and Stennie opened his hand and waved the joy buzzer. He slapped his tail against the slate in triumph. Stennie's sense of humor was extreme, but then he was only thirteen years old.

Stennie's parents had given him the Nissan Alpha for his twelfth birthday and we had been customizing it ever since. We installed blue mirror glass and Stennie painted scenes from the Late Cretaceous on the exterior body armor. We ripped out all the seats, put in a wall-to-wall gel mat and a fridge and a microwave and a screen and a mini-dish. Comrade had even done an illegal operation on the carbrain so that we could override in an emergency and actually steer the Alpha ourselves with a joystick. It would have been cramped, but we would have lived in Stennie's car if our parents had let us.

"You okay there, Mr. Boy?" said Stennie.

"Mmm." As I watched the trees whoosh past in the rain, I pretended that the car was standing still and the world was passing me by.

"Think of something to do, okay?" Stennie had the car and all and he was fun to play with, but ideas were not his specialty. He was probably smart for a dinosaur. "I'm bored."

"Leave him alone, will you?" Comrade said.

"He hasn't said anything yet." Stennie stretched and nudged me with his foot. "Say something." He had legs like a horse: yellow skin stretched tight over long bones and stringy muscle.

"Prosrees! He just had his genes twanked, you jack." Comrade always took good care of me. Or tried to. "Remember what that's like? He's in damage control."

"Maybe I should go to socialization," Stennie said. "Aren't they having a dance this afternoon?"

"You're talking to me?" said the Alpha. "You haven't earned enough

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learning credits to socialize. You're a quiz behind and forty-five minutes short of E-class. You haven't linked since . . ."

"Just shut up and drive me over." Stennie and the Alpha did not get along. He thought the car was too strict. "I'll make up the plugging quiz, okay?" He probed a mess of empty juice boxes and snack wrappers with his foot. "Anyone see my comm anywhere?"

Stennie's schoolcomm was wedged behind my cushion. "You know," I said, "I can't take much more of this." I leaned forward, wriggled it free and handed it over.

"Of what, *poputchik?*" said Comrade. "Joyriding? Listening to the lizard here?"

"Being stunted."

Stennie flipped up the screen of his comm and went on line with the school's computer. "You guys help me, okay?" He retracted his claws and tapped at the oversized keyboard.

"It's extreme while you're on the table," I said, "but now I feel empty. Like I've lost myself."

"You'll get over it," said Stennie. "First question: Brand name of the first wiseguys sold for home use?"

"NEC-Bots, of course," said Comrade.

"Geneva? It got nuked, right?"

"Da."

"Haile Selassie was that king of Egypt who the Marleys claim is god, right? Name the Cold Wars: Nicaragua, Angola . . . Korea was the first." Typing was hard work for Stennie; he did not have enough fingers for it. "One was something like Venezuela. Or something."

"Sure it wasn't Venice?"

"Or Venus?" I said, but Stennie was not paying attention.

"All right, I know that one. And that. The Sovs built the first space station. Ronald Reagan—he was the president who dropped the bomb?"

Comrade reached inside of his coat and pulled out an envelope. "I got you something, Mr. Boy. A get well present for your collection."

I opened it and scoped a picture of a naked dead fat man on a stainless steel table. The print had a DI verification grid on it, which meant this was the real thing, not a composite. Just above the corpse's left eye there was a neat hole. It was rimmed with purple which had faded to bruise blue. He had curly gray hair on his head and chest, skin the color of dried mayonnaise and a wonderfully complicated penis graft. He looked relieved to be dead. "Who was he?" I liked Comrade's present. It was extreme.

"CEO of Infoline. He had the wife, you know, the one who stole all the money so she could download herself into a computer."

I shivered as I stared at the dead man. I could hear myself breathing

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and feel the blood squirting through my arteries. "Didn't they turn her off?" I said. This was the kind of stuff we were not even supposed to imagine, much less look at. Too bad they had cleaned him up. "How much did this cost me?"

"You don't want to know."

"Hey!" Stennie thumped his tail against the side of the car. "I'm taking a quiz here and you guys are drooling over porn. When was the First World Depression?

"Who cares?" I slipped the picture back into the envelope and grinned at Comrade.

"Well, let me see then." Stennie snatched the envelope. "You know what I think, Mr. Boy? I think this corpse jag you're on is kind of sick. Besides, you're going to get in trouble if you let Comrade keep breaking laws. Isn't this picture private?"

"Privacy is twentieth century thinking. It's all information, Stennie, and information should be accessible." I held out my hand. "But if *glasnost* bothers you, give it up." I wiggled my fingers.

Comrade snickered. Stennie pulled out the picture, glanced at it and hissed. "You're scaring me, Mr. Boy."

His schoolcomm beeped as it posted his score on the quiz and he sailed the envelope back across the car at me. "Not Venezuela, Viet Nam. Hey, *Truman* dropped the plugging bomb. Reagan was the one who spent all the money. What's wrong with you dumbscuts? Now I owe school another fifteen minutes."

"Hey, if you don't make it look good, they'll know you had help." Comrade laughed.

"What's with this dance anyway? You don't dance." I picked Comrade's present up and tucked it into my shirt pocket. "You find yourself a cush or something, lizard boy?"

"Maybe." Stennie could not blush but sometimes when he was embarrassed the loose skin under his jaw quivered. Even though he had been reshaped into a dinosaur, he was still growing up. "Maybe I am getting a little. What's it to you?"

"If you're getting it," I said, "it's got to be microscopic." This was a bad sign. I was losing him to his dick, just like all the other pals. No way I wanted to start over with someone new. I had been alive for twenty-five years now. I was running out of things to say to thirteen-year-olds.

As the Alpha pulled up to the school, I scoped the crowd waiting for the doors to open for third shift. Although there were a handful of stunted kids, a pair of gorilla brothers who were football stars and Freddy the Teddy, a bear who had furry hands instead of real paws, the majority of students at New Canaan High looked more or less normal. Most working stiffs thought that people who had their genes twanked were freaks.

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"Come get me at 5:15," Stennie told the Alpha. "In the meantime, take these guys wherever they want to go." He opened the door. "You rest up, Mr. Boy, okay?"

"What?" I was not paying attention. "Sure." I had just seen the most beautiful girl in the world.

She leaned against one of the concrete columns of the portico, chatting with a couple other kids. Her hair was long and nut-colored and the ends twinkled. She was wearing a loose black robe over mirror skintights. Her schoolcomm dangled from a strap around her wrist. She appeared to be seventeen, maybe eighteen. But of course, appearances could be deceiving.

Girls had never interested me much, but I could not help but admire this one. "Wait, Stennie! Who's that?" She saw me point at her. "With the hair?"

"She's new—has one of those names you can't pronounce." He showed me his teeth as he got out. "Hey Mr. Boy, you're *stunted*. You haven't got what she wants."

He kicked the door shut, lowered his head and crossed in front of the car. When he walked he looked like he was trying to squash a bug with each step. His snaky tail curled high behind him for balance, his twiggy little arms dangled. When the new girl saw him, she pointed and smiled. Or maybe she was pointing at me.

"Where to?" said the car.

"I don't know." I sank low into my seat and pulled out Comrade's present again. "Home, I guess."

I was not the only one in my family with twanked genes. My mom was a three-quarters scale replica of the Statue of Liberty. Originally she wanted to be full-sized, but then she would have been the tallest thing in New Canaan, Connecticut. The town turned her down when she applied for a zoning variance. Her lawyers and their lawyers sued and countersued for almost two years. Mom's claim was that since she was born human, her freedom of form was protected by the Thirtieth Amendment. However, the form she wanted was a curtain of reshaped cells which would hang on a forty-two meter high ferroplastic skeleton. Her structure, said the planning board, was clearly subject to building codes and zoning laws. Eventually they reached an out-of-court settlement, which was why Mom was only as tall as an eleven story building.

She complied with the town's request for a setback of five hundred meters from Route 123. As Stennie's Alpha drove us down the long driveway, Comrade broadcast the recognition code which told the robot sentries that we were okay. One thing Mom and the town agreed on from the start: no tourists. Sure, she loved publicity, but she was also very

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fragile. In some places her skin was only a centimeter thick. Chunks of ice falling from her crown could punch holes in her.

The end of our driveway cut straight across the lawn to Mom's granite-paved foundation pad. To the west of the plaza, directly behind her, was a utility building faced in ashlar that housed her support systems. Mom had been bioengineered to be pretty much self-sufficient. She was green not only to match the real Statue of Liberty but also because she was photosynthetic. All she needed was a yearly truckload of fertilizer, water from the well, and a hundred and fifty kilowatts of electricity a day. Except for emergency surgery, the only time she required maintenance was in the fall, when her outer cells tended to flake off and had to be swept up and carted away.

Stennie's Alpha dropped us off by the doorbone in the right heel and then drove off to do whatever cars do when nobody is using them. Mom's greeter was waiting in the reception area inside the foot.

"Peter." She tried to hug me but I dodged out of her grasp. "How are you, Peter?"

"Tired." Even though Mom knew I did not like to be called that, I kissed the air near her cheek. Peter Cage was her name for me; I had given it up years ago.

"You poor boy. Here, let me see you." She held me at arm's length and brushed her fingers against my cheek. "You don't look a day over twelve. Oh, they do such good work—don't you think?" She squeezed my shoulder. "Are you happy with it?"

I think my mom meant well, but she never did understand me. Especially when she talked to me with her greeter remote. I wormed out of her grip and fell back onto one of the couches. "What's to eat?"

"Doboys, noodles, fries—whatever you want." She beamed at me and then bent over impulsively and gave me a kiss that I did not want. I never paid much attention to the greeter; she was lighter than air. She was always smiling and asking five questions in a row without waiting for an answer and flitting around the room. It wore me out just watching her. Naturally everything I said or did was cute, even if I was trying to be obnoxious. It was no fun being cute. Today Mom had her greeter wearing a dark blue dress and a very dumb white apron. The greeter's umbilical was too short to stretch up to the kitchen. So why was she wearing an apron? "I'm really, really glad you're home," she said.

"I'll take some cinnamon doboys." I kicked off my shoes and rubbed my bare feet through the dense black hair on the floor. "And a beer."

All of Mom's remotes had different personalities. I liked Nanny all right; she was simple but at least she listened. The lovers were a challenge because they were usually too busy looking into mirrors to notice me. Cook was as pretentious as a four star menu; the housekeeper had

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all the charm of a vacuum cleaner. I had always wondered what it would be like to talk directly to Mom's main brain up in the head, because then she would not be filtered through a remote. She would be herself.

"Cook is making you some nice broth to go with your doboys," said the greeter. "Nanny says you shouldn't be eating dessert all the time."

"Hey, did I ask for broth?"

At first Comrade had hung back while the greeter was fussing over me. Then he slid along the wrinkled pink walls of the reception room toward the plug where the greeter's umbilical was attached. When she started in about the broth I saw him lean against the plug. Carelessly, you know? At the same time he stepped on the greeter's umbilical, crimping the furry black cord. She gasped and the smile flattened horribly on her face as if her lips were two ropes someone had suddenly yanked taut. Her head jerked toward the umbilical plug.

"E-Excuse me." She was twitching.

"What?" Comrade glanced down at his foot as if it belonged to a stranger. "Oh, sorry." He pushed away from the wall and strolled across the room toward us. Although he seemed apologetic, about half the heads on his window coat were laughing.

The greeter flexed her cheek muscles. "You'd better watch out for your toy, Peter," she said. "It's going to get you in trouble someday."

Mom did not like Comrade much, even though she had given him to me when I was first stunted. She got mad when I snuck him down to Manhattan a couple of years ago to have a chop job done on his behavioral regulators. For a while after the operation, he used to ask me before he broke the law. Now he was on his own. He got caught once and she warned me he was out of control. But she still threw money at the people until they went away.

"Trouble?" I said. "Sounds like fun." I thought we were too rich for trouble. I was the trust baby of a trust baby; we had vintage money and lots of it. I stood and Comrade picked up my shoes for me. "And he's not a toy; he's my best friend." I put my arms around his shoulder. "Tell Cook I'll eat in my rooms."

I was tired after the long climb up the circular stairs to Mom's chest. When the roombrain sensed I had come in, it turned on all the electronic windows and blinked my message indicator. One reason I still lived in my mom was that she kept out of my rooms. She had promised me total security and I believed her. Actually I doubted that she cared enough to pry, although she could easily have tapped my windows. I was safe from her remotes up here, even the housekeeper. Comrade did everything for me.

I sent him for supper, perched on the edge of the bed, and cleared the

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nearest window of army ants foraging for meat through some Angolan jungle. The first message in the queue was from a gray-haired stiff wearing a navy blue corporate uniform. "Hello, Mr. Cage. My name is Weldon Montross and I'm with Datasafe. I'd like to arrange a meeting with you at your convenience. Call my DI number, 408-966-3286. I hope to hear from you soon."

"What the hell is Datasafe?"

The roombrain ran a search. "Datasafe offers services in encryption and information security. It was incorporated in the state of Delaware in 2013. Estimated billings last year were 340 million dollars. Headquarters are in San Jose, California, with branch offices in White Plains, New York and Chevy Chase, Maryland. Foreign offices. . . ."

"Are they trying to sell me something or what?"

The room did not offer an answer. "Delete," I said. "Next?"

Weldon Montross was back again, looking exactly as he had before. I wondered if he were using a virtual image. "Hello, Mr. Cage. I've just discovered that you've been admitted to the Thayer Clinic for rejuvenation therapy. Believe me when I say that I very much regret having to bother you during your convalescence and I would not do so if this were not a matter of importance. Would you please contact Department of Identification number 408-966-3286 as soon as you're able?"

"You're a pro, Weldon, I'll say that for you." Prying client information out of the Thayer Clinic was not easy, but then the guy was no doubt some kind of op. He was way too polite to be a salesman. What did Datasafe want with me? "Any more messages from him?"

"No," said the roombrain.

"Well, delete this one too and if he calls back tell him I'm too busy unless he wants to tell me what he's after." I stretched out on my bed. "Next?" The gel mattress shivered as it took my weight.

Happy Lurdane was having a smash party on the twentieth but Happy was a boring cush and there was a bill from the pet store for the iguanas that I paid and a warning from the SPCA that I deleted and a special offer for preferred customers from my favorite fireworks company that I saved to look at later and my dad was about to ask for another loan when I paused him and deleted and last of all there was a message from Stennie, time stamped ten minutes ago.

"Hey Mr. Boy, if you're feeling better I've lined up a VE party for tonight." He did not quite fit into the school's telelink booth; all I could see was his toothy face and the long yellow curve of his neck. "Bunch of us have reserved some time on Playroom. Come in disguise. That new kid said she'd link, so scope her yourself if you're so hot. I found out her name but it's kind of unpronounceable. Tree-something Joplin. Anyway

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it's at seven, meet on channel 17, password is warhead. Hey, did you send my car back yet? Later." He faded.

"Sounds like fun." Comrade kicked the doorbone open and backed through, balancing a tray loaded with soup and fresh doboys and a mug of cold beer. "Are we going?" He set it onto the nightstand next to my bed.

"Maybe." I yawned. It felt good to be in my own bed. "Flush the damn soup, would you?" I reached over for a doboy and felt something crinkle in my jacket pocket. I pulled out the picture of the dead CEO. About the only thing I did not like about it was that the eyes were shut. You feel dirtier when the corpse stares back. "This is one sweet hunk of meat, Comrade." I propped the picture beside the tray. "How did you get it, anyway? Must have taken some operating."

"Three days worth. Encryption wasn't all that tough but there was lots of it." Comrade admired the picture with me as he picked up the bowl of soup. "I ended up buying about ten hours from IBM to crack the file. Kind of pricey but since you were getting stunted, I had nothing else to do."

"You see the messages from that security op?" I bit into a doboy. "Maybe you were a little sloppy." The hot cinnamon scent tickled my nose.

"Ya v'rot ego ebal!" He laughed. "So some stiff is cranky? Plug him if he can't take a joke."

I said nothing. Comrade could be a pain sometimes. Of course I loved the picture, but he really should have been more careful. He had made a mess and left it for me to clean up. Just what I needed. I knew I would only get mad if I thought about it, so I changed the subject. "Well, do you think she's cute?"

"What's-her-face Joplin?" Comrade turned abruptly toward the bathroom. "Sure, for a *perdunya,"* he said over his shoulder. "Why not?" Talking about girls made him snippy. I think he was afraid of them.

I brought my army ants back onto the window; they were swarming over a lump with brown fur. Thinking about him hanging on my elbow when I met this Tree-something Joplin made me feel weird. I listened as he poured the soup down the toilet. I was not myself at all. Getting stunted changes you; no one can predict how. I chugged the beer and rolled over to take a nap. It was the first time I had ever thought of leaving Comrade behind.

"VE party, Mr. Boy." Comrade nudged me awake. "Are we going or not?"

"Huh?" My gut still ached from the rejuvenation and I woke up mean enough to chew glass. "What do you mean *we?"*

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"Nothing." Comrade had that blank look he always put on so I would not know what he was thinking. Still I could tell he was disappointed. "Are you going then?" he said.

I stretched—*ouch!* "Yeah, sure, get my joysuit." My bones felt brittle as candy. "And stop acting sorry for yourself." This nasty mood had momentum; it swept me past any regrets. "No way I'm going to lie here all night watching you pretend you have feelings to hurt."

"Tak tochno." He saluted and went straight to the closet. I got out of bed and hobbled to the bathroom.

"This is a costume party, remember," Comrade called. "What are you wearing?

"Whatever." Even his efficiency irked me; sometimes he did too much. "You decide." I needed to get away from him for a while.

Playroom was a new virtual environment service on our local net. If you wanted to throw an electronic party at Versailles or Monticello or San Simeon, all you had to do was link—if you could get a reservation.

I came back to the bedroom and Comrade stepped up behind me, holding the joysuit. I shrugged into it, velcroed the front seam and eyed myself in the nearest window. He had synthesized some kid-sized armor in the German Gothic style. My favorite. It was made of polished silver, with great fluting and scalloping. He had even programmed a little glow into the image so that on the window I looked like a walking night light. There was an armet helmet with a red ostrich plume; the visor was tipped up so I could see my face. I raised my arm and the joysuit translated the movement to the window so that my armored image waved back.

"Try a few steps," he said.

Although I could move easily in the lightweight joysuit, the motion interpreter made walking in the video armor seem realistically awkward. Comrade had scored the sound effects, too. Metal hinges rasped, chain mail rattled softly, and there was a satisfying *clunk* whenever my foot hit the floor.

"Great." I clenched my fist in approval. I was awake now and in control of my temper. I wanted to make up but Comrade was not taking the hint. I could never quite figure out whether he was just acting like a machine or whether he really did not care how I treated him.

"They're starting." All the windows in the room lit up with Playroom's welcome screen. "You want privacy, so I'm leaving. No one will bother you."

"Hey Comrade, you don't have to go . . ."

But he had already left the room. Playroom prompted me to identify myself. "Mr. Boy," I said, "Department of Identification number 203-966-2445. I'm looking for channel 17; the password is warhead."

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A brass band started playing "Hail to the Chief" as the title screen lit the windows:

The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue
Washington, DC, USA
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and then I was looking at a wraparound view of a VE ballroom. A caption bar opened at the top of the windows and a message scrolled across. *This is the famous East Room, the largest room in the main house. It is used for press conferences, public receptions and entertainments.* I lowered my visor and entered the simulation.

The East Room was decorated in bone white and gold; three chandeliers hung like cut glass mushrooms above the huge parquet floor. A band played skitter at one end of the room but no one was dancing yet. The band was Warhead, according to their drum set. I had never heard of them. Someone's disguise? I turned and the joysuit changed the view on the windows. Just ahead Satan was chatting with a forklift and a rhinoceros. Beyond some blue cartoons were teasing Johnny America. There was not much furniture in the room, a couple of benches, an ugly piano, and some life-sized paintings of George and Martha. George looked like he had just been peeled off a cash card. I stared at him too long and the closed caption bar informed me that the painting had been painted by Gilbert Stuart and was the only White House object dating from the mansion's first occupancy in 1800.

"Hey," I said to a girl who was on fire. "How do I get rid of the plugging tour guide?"

"Can't," she said. "When Playroom found out we were kids they turned on all their educational crap and there's no override. I kind of don't think they want us back."

"Dumbscuts." I scoped the room for something that might be Stennie. No luck. "I like the way your hair is burning." Now that it was too late, I was sorry I had to make idle party chat.

"Thanks." When she tossed her head, sparks flared and crackled. "My mom helped me program it."

"So, I've never been to the White House. Is there more than this?"

"Sure," she said. "We're supposed to have pretty much the whole first floor. Unless they shorted us. You wouldn't be Stone Kinkaid in there, would you?"

"No, not really." Even through the voice was disguised, I could tell this was Happy Lurdane. I edged away from her. "I'm going to check the other rooms now. Later."

"If you run into Stone, tell him I'm looking for him."

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I left the East Room and found myself in a long marble passageway with a red carpet. A dog skeleton trotted toward me. Or maybe it was supposed to be a sheep. I waved and went through a door on the other side.

Everyone in the Red Room was standing on the ceiling; I knew I had found Stennie. Even though what they see is only a simulation, most people lock into the perceptual field of a VE as if it were real. Stand on your head long enough—even if only in your imagination—and you get airsick. It took kilohours of practice to learn to compensate. Upside down was one of Stennie's trademark ways of showing off.

The Red Room is an intimate parlor in the American Empire style of 1815–20 . . .

"Hi," I said. I hopped over the wainscotting and walked up the silk-covered wall to join the three of them.

"You're wearing German armor." When the boy in blue grinned at me, his cheeks dimpled. He was wearing shorts and white knee socks, a navy sweater over a white shirt. "Augsburg?" said Little Boy Blue. Fine blond hair drooped from beneath his tweed cap.

"Try Wolf of Landshut," I said. Stennie and I had spent a lot of time fighting VE wars in full armor. "Nice shorts." Stennie's costume reminded me of Christopher Robin. Terminally cute.

"It's not fair," said the snowman, who I did not recognize. "He says this is what he actually looks like." The snowman was standing in a puddle which was dripping onto the rug below us. Great effect.

"No," said Stennie, "what I said was I would look like this if I hadn't done something about it, okay?"

I had not known Stennie before he was a dinosaur. "No wonder you got twanked." I wished I could have saved this image, but Playroom was copy-protected.

"You've been twanked? No joke?" The great horned owl ruffled in alarm. She had a girl's voice. "I know it's none of my business, but I don't understand why anyone would do it. Especially a kid. I mean, what's wrong with good old fashioned surgery? And you can be whoever you want in a VE." She paused, waiting for someone to agree with her. No help. "Okay, so I don't understand. But when you mess with your genes, you change who you are. I mean, don't you like who you are? *I* do."

"We're so happy for you." Stennie scowled. "What is this, mental health week?"

"We're rich," I said. "We can afford to hate ourselves."

"This may sound rude . . ." The owl's big blunt head swivelled from Stennie to me. ". . . but I think that's sad."

"Yeah well, we'll try to work up some tears for you, birdie," Stennie said.

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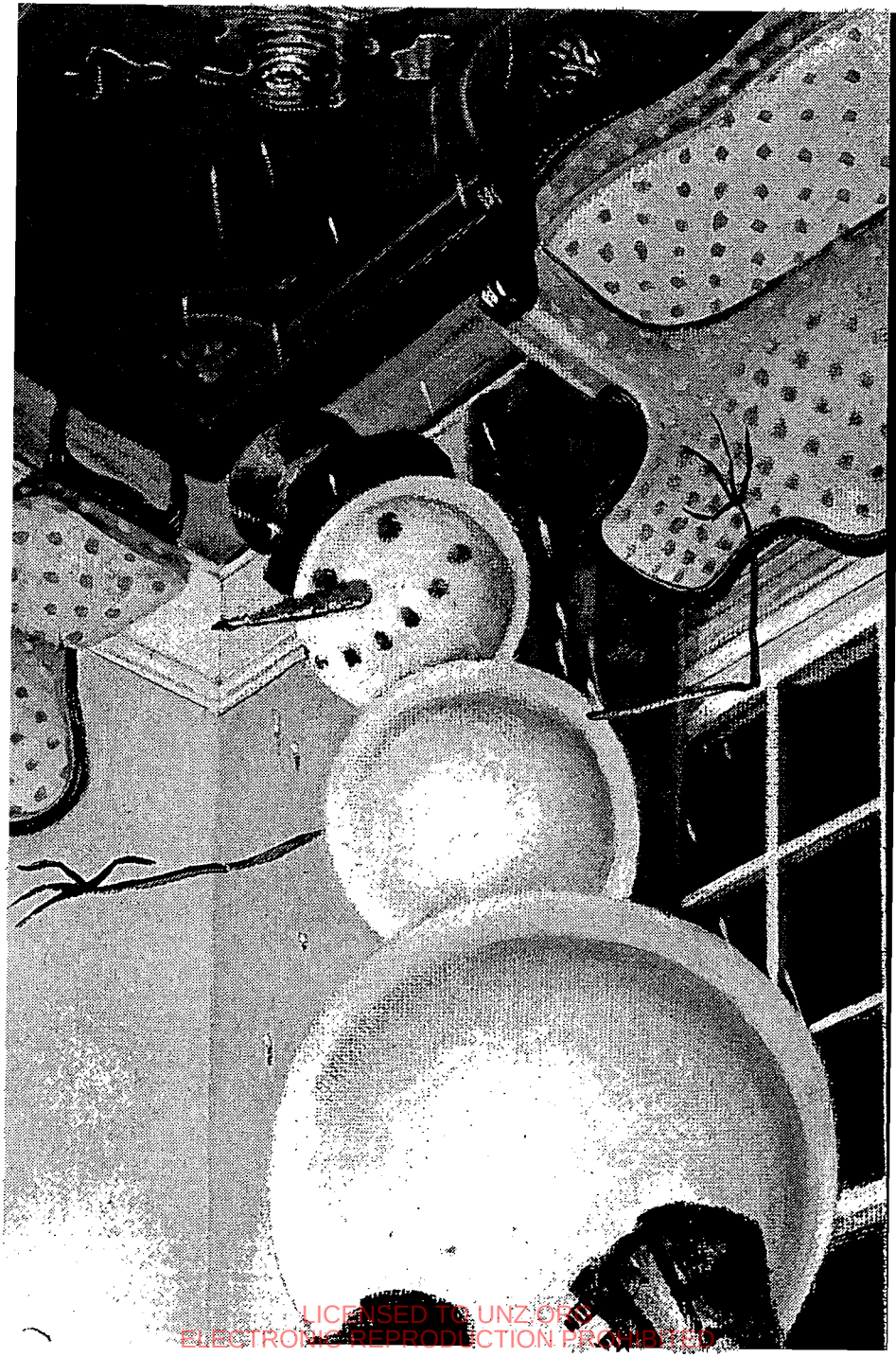

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Silence. In the East Room, the band turned the volume up.

"Anyway, I've got to be going." The owl shook herself. "Hanging upside-down is fine for bats, but not for me. Later." She let go of her perch and swooped out into the hall. The snowman turned to watch her go.

"You're driving them off, young man." I patted Stennie on the head. "Come on now, be nice."

"Nice makes me puke."

"You *do* have a bit of an edge tonight." I had trouble imagining this dainty little brat as my best friend. "Better watch out you don't cut someone."

The dog skeleton came to the doorway and called up to us. "We're supposed to dance now."

"About time." Stennie fell off the ceiling like a drop of water and splashed headfirst onto the beige Persian rug. His image went all muddy for a moment and then he reformed, upright and unharmed. "Going to skitter, tin man?"

"I need to talk to you for a moment," the snowman murmured.

"You *need* to?" I said.

"Dance, dance, dance," sang Stennie. "Later." He swerved after the skeleton out of the room.

The snowman said, "It's about a possible theft of information."

Right then was when I should have slammed it into reverse. Caught up with Stennie or maybe faded from Playroom altogether. But all I did was raise my hands over my head. "You got me, snowman; I confess. But society is to blame, too, isn't it? You will tell the judge to go easy on me? I've had a tough life."

"This is serious."

"You're Weldon—what's your name?" Down the hall, I could hear the thud of Warhead's bass line. "Montross."

"I'll come to the point, Peter." The only acknowledgment he made was to drop the kid voice. "The firm I represent provides information security services. Last week someone operated on the protected database of one of our clients. We have reason to believe that a certified photograph was accessed and copied. What can you tell me about this?"

"Not bad, Mr. Montross sir. But if you were as good as you think you are, you'd know my name isn't Peter. It's Mr. Boy. And since nobody invited you to this party, maybe you'd better tell me now why I shouldn't just go ahead and have you deleted?"

"I know that you were undergoing genetic therapy at the time of the theft so you could not have been directly responsible. That's in your favor. However, I also know that you can help me clear this matter up. And you need to do that, son, just as quickly as you can. Otherwise there's big trouble coming."

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"What are you going to do, tell my mommy?" My blood started to pump; I was coming back to life.

"This is my offer. It's not negotiable. You let me sweep your files for this image. You turn over any hardcopies you've made and you instruct your wiseguy to let me do a spot reprogramming, during which I will erase his memory of this incident. After that, we'll consider the matter closed."

"Why don't I just drop my pants and bend over while I'm at it?"

"Look, you can pretend if you want, but you're not a kid anymore. You're twenty-five years old. I don't believe for a minute that you're as thick as your friends out there. If you think about it, you'll realize that you can't fight us. The fact that I'm here and I know what I know means that all your personal information systems are already tapped. I'm an op, son. I could wipe your files clean any time and I will, if it comes to that. However, my orders are to be thorough. The only way I can be sure I have everything is if you cooperate."

"You're not even real, are you, Montross? I'll bet you're nothing but cheesy old code. I've talked to elevators with more personality."

"The offer is on the table."

"Stick it!"

The owl flew back into the room, braked with outstretched wings and caught onto the armrest of the Dolley Madison sofa. "Oh, you're still here," she said, noticing us. "I didn't mean to interrupt. . . ."

"Wait there," I said. "I'm coming right down."

"I'll be in touch," said the snowman. "Let me know just as soon as you change your mind." He faded.

I flipped backward off the ceiling and landed in front of her; my video armor rang from the impact. "Owl, you just saved the evening." I knew I was showing off, but just then I was willing to forgive myself. "Thanks."

"You're welcome, I guess." She edged away from me, moving with precise little birdlike steps toward the top of the couch. "But all I was trying to do was escape the band."

"Bad?"

"And loud." Her ear tufts flattened. "Do you think shutting the door would help?"

"Sure. Follow me. We can shut lots of doors." When she hesitated, I flapped my arms like silver wings. Actually, Montross had done me a favor; when he threatened me some inner clock had begun an adrenalin tick. If this was trouble, I wanted more. I felt twisted and dangerous and I did not care what happened next. Maybe that was why the owl flitted after me as I walked into the next room.

The sumptuous State Dining Room can seat about 130 for formal din-

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ners. The white and gold decor dates from the administration of Theodore Roosevelt.

The owl glided over to the banquet table. I shut the door behind me. "Better?" Warhead still pounded on the walls.

"A little." She settled on a huge bronze doré centerpiece with a mirrored surface. "I'm going soon anyway."

"Why?"

"The band stinks, I don't know anyone and I hate these stupid disguises."

"I'm Mr. Boy." I raised my visor and grinned at her. "All right? Now you know someone."

She tucked her wings into place and fixed me with her owlish stare. "I don't like VEs much."

"They take some getting used to."

"Why bother?" she said. "I mean, if anything can happen in a simulation, nothing matters. And I feel dumb standing in a room all alone jumping up and down and flapping my arms. Besides, this joysuit is hot and I'm renting it by the hour."

"The trick is not to look at yourself," I said. "Just watch the screens and use your imagination."

"Reality is less work. You look like a little kid."

"Is that a problem?"

"Mr. Boy? What kind of name is that anyway?"

I wished she would blink. "A made up name. But then all names are made up, aren't they?"

"Didn't I see you at school Wednesday? You were the one who dropped off the dinosaur."

"My friend Stennie." I pulled out a chair and sat facing her. "Who you probably hate because he's twanked."

"That was him on the ceiling, wasn't it? Listen, I'm sorry about what I said. I'm new here. I'd never met anyone like him before I came to New Canaan. I mean, I'd heard of reshaping and all—getting twanked. But where I used to live, everybody was pretty much the same."

"Where was that, Squirrel Crossing, Nebraska?"

"Close." She laughed. "Elkhart; it's in Indiana."

The reckless ticking in my head slowed. Talking to her made it easy to forget about Montross. "You want to leave the party?" I said. "We could go into discreet."

"Just us?" She sounded doubtful. "Right now?"

"Why not? You said you weren't staying. We could get rid of these disguises. And the music."

She was silent for a moment. Maybe people in Elkhart, Indiana, did

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not ask one another into discreet unless they had met in Sunday school or the Four H Club.

"Okay," she said finally, "but I'll enable. What's your DI?"

I gave her my number.

"Be back in a minute."

I cleared Playroom from my screens. The message *Enabling discreet mode* flashed. I decided not to change out of the joysuit; instead I called up my wardrobe menu and chose an image of myself wearing black baggies. The loose folds and padded shoulders helped hide the scrawny little boy's body.

The message changed. *Discreet mode enabled. Do you accept, yes/no?*

"Sure," I said.

She was sitting naked in the middle of a room filled with tropical plants. Her skin was the color of cinnamon. She had freckles on her shoulders and across her breasts. Her hair tumbled down the curve of her spine; the ends glowed like embers in a breeze. She clutched her legs close to her and gave me a curious smile. Teenage still life. We were alone and secure. No one could tap us while we were in discreet. We could say anything we wanted. I was too croggled to speak.

"You *are* a little kid," she said.

I did not tell her that what she was watching was an enhanced image, a virtual me. "Uh . . . well, not really." I was glad Stennie could not see me. Mr. Boy at a loss—a first. "Sometimes I'm not sure what I am. I guess you're not going to like me either. I've been stunted a couple of times. I'm really twenty-five years old."

She frowned. "You keep deciding I won't like people. Why?"

"Most people are against genetic surgery. Probably because they haven't got the money."

"Myself, I wouldn't do it. Still, just because you did doesn't mean I hate you." She gestured for me to sit. "But my parents would probably be horrified. They're realists, you know."

"No fooling?" I could not help but chuckle. "That explains a lot." Like why she had an attitude about twanking. And why she thought VEs were dumb. And why she was naked and did not seem to care. According to hard-core realists, first came clothes, then jewelry, fashion, makeup, plastic surgery, skin tints, and *hey jack,* here we are up to our eyeballs in the delusions of 2096. Gene twanking, VE addicts, people downloading themselves into computers—better never to have started. They wanted to turn back to worn-out twentieth century modes. "But you're no realist," I said. "Look at your hair."

She shook her head and the ends twinkled. "You like it?"

"It's extreme. But realists don't decorate!"

"Then maybe I'm not a realist. My parents let me try lots of stuff they

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wouldn't do themselves, like buying hairworks or linking to VEs. They're afraid I'd leave otherwise."

"Would you?"

She shrugged. "So what's it like to get stunted? I've heard it hurts."

I told her how sometimes I felt as if there were broken glass in my joints and how my bones ached and—more showing off—about the blood I would find on the toilet paper. Then I mentioned something about Mom. She had heard of Mom, of course. She asked about my dad and I explained how Mom paid him to stay away but that he kept running out of money. She wanted to know if I was working or still going to school and I made up some stuff about courses in history I was taking from Yale. Actually I had faded after my first semester. Couple of years ago. I did not have time to link to some boring college; I was too busy playing with Comrade and Stennie. But I still had an account at Yale.

"So that's who I am." I was amazed at how little I had lied. "Who are you?"

She told me that her name was Treemonisha but her friends called her Tree. It was an old family name; her great-great-grandsomething-or-other had been a composer named Scott Joplin. Treemonisha was the name of his opera.

I had to force myself not to stare at her breasts when she talked. "You like *opera*?" I said.

"My dad says I'll grow into it." She made a face. "I hope not."

The Joplins were a franchise family; her mom and dad had just been transferred to the Green Dream, a plant shop in the Elm Street Mall. To hear her talk, you would think she had ordered them from the Good Fairy. They had been married for twenty-two years and were still together. She had a brother, Fidel, who was twelve. They all lived in the greenhouse next to the shop where they grew most of their food and where flowers were always in bloom and where everybody loved everyone else. Nice life for a bunch of mall drones. So why was she thinking of leaving?

"You should stop by sometime," she said.

"Sometime," I said. "Sure."

For hours after we faded, I kept remembering things about her I had not realized I had noticed. The fine hair on her legs. The curve of her eyebrows. The way her hands moved when she was excited.

It was Stennie's fault: after the Playroom party he started going to school almost every day. Not just linking to E-class with his comm, but actually showing up. We knew he had more than remedial reading on his mind, but no matter how much we teased, he would not talk about his mysterious new cush. Before he fell in love we used to joyride in his

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Alpha afternoons. Now Comrade and I had the car all to ourselves. Not as much fun.

We had already dropped Stennie off when I spotted Treemonisha waiting for the bus. I waved, she came over. The next thing I knew we had another passenger on the road to nowhere. Comrade stared vacantly out the window as we pulled onto South Street; he did not seem pleased with the company.

"Have you been out to the reservoir?" I said. "There are some extreme houses out there. Or we could drive over to Greenwich and look at yachts."

"I haven't been anywhere yet, so I don't care," she said. "By the way, you don't go to college." She was not accusing me or even asking—merely stating a fact.

"Why do you say that?" I said.

"Fidel told me."

I wondered how her twelve year old brother could know anything at all about me. Rumors maybe, or just guessing. Since she did not seem mad, I decided to tell the truth.

"He's right," I said, "I lied. I have an account at Yale but I haven't linked for months. Hey, you can't live without telling a few lies. At least I don't discriminate. I'll lie to anyone, even myself."

"You're bad." A smile twitched at the corners of her mouth. "So what *do* you do then?"

"I drive around a lot." I waved at the interior of Stennie's car. "Let's see . . . I go to parties. I buy stuff and use it."

"Fidel says you're rich."

"I'm going to have to meet this Fidel. Does money make a difference?"

When she nodded, her hairworks twinkled. Comrade gave me a knowing glance but I paid no attention. I was trying to figure out how she could make insults sound like compliments when I realized we were flirting. The idea took me by surprise. *Flirting.*

"Do you have any music?" Treemonisha said.

The Alpha asked what groups she liked and so we listened to some mindless dance hits as we took the circle route around the Laurel Reservoir. Treemonisha told me about how she was sick of her parents' store and rude customers and especially the dumb Green Dream uniform. "Back in Elkhart, Daddy used to make me wear it to school. Can you believe that? He said it was good advertising. When we moved, I told him either the khakis went or I did."

She had a yellow and orange dashiki over midnight blue skintights. "I like your clothes," I said. "You have taste."

"Thanks." She bobbed her head in time to the music. "I can't afford much because I can't get an outside job because I have to work for my parents. It makes me mad, sometimes. I mean, franchise life is fine for

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Mom and Dad; they're happy being tucked in every night by GD, Inc. But I want more. Thrills, chills—you know, adventure. No one has adventures in the mall."

As we drove, I showed her the log castle, the pyramids, the private train that pulled sleeping cars endlessly around a two mile track and the marble bunker where Sullivan, the assassinated president, still lived on in computer memory. Comrade kept busy acting bored.

"Can we go see your mom?" said Treemonisha. "All the kids at school tell me she's awesome."

Suddenly Comrade was interested in the conversation. I was not sure what the kids at school were talking about. Probably they wished they had seen Mom but I had never asked any of them over—except for Stennie.

"Not a good idea." I shook my head. "She's more flimsy than she looks, you know, and she gets real nervous if strangers just drop by. Or even friends."

"I just want to look. I won't get out of the car."

"Well," said Comrade, "if she doesn't get out of the car, who could she hurt?"

I scowled at him. He knew how paranoid Mom was. She was not going to like Treemonisha anyway, but certainly not if I brought her home without warning. "Let me work on her, okay?" I said to Treemonisha. "One of these days. I promise."

She pouted for about five seconds and then laughed at my expression. When I saw Comrade's smirk, I got angry. He was just sitting there watching us. Looking to cause trouble. Later there would be wisecracks. I had had about enough of him and his attitude.

By that time the Alpha was heading up High Ridge Road toward Stamford. "I'm hungry," I said. "Stop at the 7-11 up ahead." I pulled a cash card out and flipped it at him. "Go buy us some doboys."

I waited until he disappeared into the store and then ordered Stennie's car to drive on.

"Hey!" Treemonisha twisted in her seat and looked back at the store. "What are you doing?"

"Ditching him."

"Why? Won't he be mad?"

"He's got my card; he'll call a cab."

"But that's mean."

"So?"

Treemonisha thought about it. "He doesn't say much, does he?" She did not seem to know what to make of me—which I suppose was what I wanted. "At first I thought he was kind of like your teddy bear. Have you seen those big ones that keep little kids out of trouble?"

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"He's just a wiseguy."

"Have you had him long?"

"Maybe too long."

I could not think of anything to say after that so we sat quietly listening to the music. Even though he was gone, Comrade was still aggravating me.

"Were you really hungry?" Treemonisha said finally. "Because I was. Think there's something in the fridge?"

I waited for the Alpha to tell us but it said nothing. I slid across the seat and opened the refrigerator door. Inside was a sheet of paper. "Dear Mr. Boy," it said. "If this was a bomb you and Comrade would be dead and the problem would be solved. Let's talk soon. Weldon Montross."

"What's that?"

I felt the warm flush that I always got from good corpse porn and for a moment I could not speak. "Practical joke," I said, crumpling the paper. "Too bad he doesn't have a sense of humor."

Push-ups. *Ten, eleven.*

"Uh-oh. Look at this," said Comrade.

"I'm busy!" *Twelve, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen . . . sixteen . . . seven. . . .* Dizzy, I slumped and rested my cheek against the warm floor. I could feel Mom's pulse beneath the tough skin. It was no good. I would never get muscles this way. There was only one fix for my skinny arms and bony shoulders. Grow up, Mr. Boy.

"*Ya yebou!* You really should scope this," said Comrade. "Very spooky."

I pulled myself onto the bed to see why he was bothering me; he had been pretty tame since I had stranded him at the 7-11. Most of the windows showed the usual: army ants next to old war movies next to feeding time from the Bronx Zoo's reptile house. But Firenet, which provided twenty-four hour coverage of killer fires from around the world, had been replaced with a picture of a morgue. There were three naked bodies, shrouds pulled back for identification: a fat gray-haired CEO with a purple hole over his left eye, Comrade, and me.

"You look kind of dead," said Comrade.

My tongue felt thick. "Where's it coming from?"

"Viruses all over the system," he said. "Probably Montross."

"You know about him?" The image on the window changed back to a *barridas* fire in Lima.

"He's been in touch." Comrade shrugged. "Made his offer."

Crying women watched as the straw walls of their huts peeled into flame and floated away.

"Oh." I did not know what to say. I wanted to reassure him, but this

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was serious. Montross was invading my life and I had no idea how to fight back. "Well, don't talk to him anymore."

"Okay." Comrade grinned. "He's dull as a spoon anyway."

"I bet he's a simulation. What else would a company like Datasafe use? You can't trust real people." I was still thinking about what I would look like dead. "Whatever, he's kind of scary." I shivered, worried and aroused at the same time. "He's slick enough to operate on Playroom. And now he's hijacking windows right here in my own mom." I should probably have told Comrade then about the note in the fridge, but we were still not talking about that day.

"He tapped into Playroom?" Comrade fitted input clips to the spikes on his neck, linked and played back the house files. "*Zayebees*. He was already here then. He piggybacked on with you." Comrade slapped his leg. "I can't understand how he beat my security so easily."

The roombrain flicked the message indicator. "Stennie's calling," it said.

"Pick up," I said.

"Hi, it's that time again." Stennie was alone in his car. "I'm on my way over to give you jacks a thrill." He pushed his triangular snout up to the camera and licked at the lens. "Doing anything?"

"Not really. Sitting around."

"I'll fix that. Five minutes." He faded.

Comrade was staring at nothing.

"Look Comrade, you did your best," I said. "I'm not mad at you."

"Too plugging easy." He shook his head as if I had missed the point.

"What I don't understand is why Montross is so cranky anyway. It's just a picture of meat."

"Maybe he's not really dead."

"Sure he is," I said. "You can't fake a verification grid."

"No, but you can fake a corpse."

"You know something?"

"If I did I wouldn't tell you," said Comrade. "You have enough problems already. Like how do we explain this to your mom?"

"We don't. Not yet. Let's wait him out. Sooner or later he's got to realize that we're not going to use his picture for anything. I mean if he's that nervous, I'll even give it back. I don't care anymore. You hear that Montross, you dumbscut? We're harmless. Get out of our lives!"

"It's more than the picture now," said Comrade. "It's me. I found the way in." He was careful to keep his expression blank.

I did not know what to say to him. No way Montross would be satisfied erasing only the memory of the operation. He would probably reconnect Comrade's regulators to bring him back under control. Turn him to pudding. He would be just another wiseguy, like anyone else could own. I

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was surprised that Comrade did not ask me to promise not to hand him over. Maybe he just assumed I would stand by him.

We did not hear Stennie coming until he sprang into the room.

"Have fun or die!" He was clutching a plastic gun in his spindly hand which he aimed at my head.

"Stennie, *no*."

He fired as I rolled across the bed. The jellybee buzzed by me and squished against one of the windows. It was a purple and immediately I smelled the tang of artificial grape flavor. The splatter on the wrinkled wall pulsed and split in two, emitting a second burst of grapeness. The two halves oozed in opposite directions, shivered and divided again.

"Fun extremist!" He shot Comrade with a cherry as he dove for the closet. "Dance!"

I bounced up and down on the bed, timing my move. He fired a green at me that missed. Comrade, meanwhile, gathered himself up as zits of red jellybee squirmed across his window coat. He barreled out of the closet into Stennie, knocking him sideways. I sprang on top of them and wrestled the gun away. Stennie was paralyzed with laughter. I had to giggle too, in part because now I could put off talking to Comrade about Montross.

By the time we untangled ourselves, the jellybees had faded. "Set for twelve generations before they all die out," Stennie said as he settled himself on the bed. "So what's this my car tells me, you've been giving free rides? Is this the cush with the name?"

"None of your business. You never tell me about your cush."

"Okay. Her name is Janet Hoyt."

"Is it?" He caught me off guard again. Twice in one day, a record. "Comrade, let's see this prize."

Comrade linked to the roombrain and ran a search. "Got her." He called Janet Hoyt's DI file to screen and her face ballooned across an entire window.

She was a tanned blue-eyed blonde with the kind of off-the-shelf looks that med students slapped onto rabbits in genoplasty courses. Nothing on her face said she was different from any other ornamental moron fresh from the OR—not a dimple or a mole, not even a freckle. "You're ditching me for her?" It took all the imagination of a potato chip to be as pretty as Janet Hoyt. "Stennie, she's generic."

"Now wait a minute," said Stennie. "If we're going to play critic, let's scope your cush, too."

Without asking, Comrade put Tree's DI photo next to Janet's. I realized he was still mad at me because of her; he was only pretending not to care. "She's not my cush," I said, but no one was listening.

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Stennie leered at her for a moment. "She's a stiff, isn't she?" he said. "She has that hungry look."

Seeing him standing there in front of the two huge faces on the wall, I felt like I was peeping on a stranger—that I was a stranger, too. I could not imagine how the two of us had come to this: Stennie and Mr. Boy with cushes. We were growing up. A frightening thought. Maybe next Stennie would get himself untwanked and really look like he had on Playroom. Then where would I be?

"Janet wants me to plug her," Stennie said.

"Right, and I'm the queen of Brooklyn."

"I'm old enough, you know." He thumped his tail against the floor.

"You're a dinosaur!"

"Hey, just because I got twanked doesn't mean *my* dick fell off."

"So do it then."

"I'm going to. I will, okay? But . . this is no good." Stennie waved impatiently at Comrade. "I can't think with them watching me." He nodded at the windows. "Turn them off already."

"*N'ye pizdi*!" Comrade wiped the two faces from the windows, cleared all the screens in the room to blood red, yanked the input clips from his neck spikes and left them dangling from the roombrain's terminal. His expression empty, he walked from the room without asking permission or saying anything at all.

"What's his problem?" Stennie said.

"Who knows?" Comrade had left the door open; I shut it. "Maybe he doesn't like girls."

"Look, I want to ask a favor." I could tell Stennie was nervous; his head kept swaying. "This is kind of embarrassing but . . . okay, do you think maybe your mom would maybe let me practice on her lovers? I don't want Janet to know I've never done it before and there's some stuff I've got to figure out."

"I don't know," I said. "Ask her."

But I did know. She would be amused.

People claimed my mom did not have a sense of humor. Lovey was huge, an ocean of a woman. Her umbilical was as big around as my thigh. When she walked waves of flesh heaved and rolled. She had beautiful skin, flawless and moist. It did not take much to make her sweat. Peeling a banana would do it. Lovey was as oral as a baby; she would put anything into her mouth. And when she did not have a mouthful, she would babble on about whatever came into Mom's head. Dear hardly ever talked, although he could moan and growl and laugh. He touched Lovey whenever he could and shot her long smouldering looks. He was not furry, exactly, but he was covered with fine silver hair. Dear was a little guy,

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about my size. Although he had one of Upjohn's finest penises, elastic and overloaded with neurons, he was one of the least convincing males I had ever met. I doubt Mom herself believed in him all that much.

Big chatty woman, squirrelly tongue-tied little man. It *was* funny in a bent sort of way to watch the two of them go at each other. Kind of like a tug churning against a supertanker. They did not get the chance that often. It was dangerous; Dear had to worry about getting crushed and poor Lovey's heart had stopped two or three times. Besides, I think Mom liked building up the pressure. Sometimes, as the days without sex stretched, you could almost feel lust sparkling off them like static electricity.

That was how they were when I brought Stennie up. Their suite took up the entire floor at the hips, Mom's widest part. Lovey was lolling in a tub of warm oil. She liked it flowery and laced with pheromones. Dear was prowling around her with a desperate expression, like he might jam his plug into a wall socket if he did not get taken care of soon. Stennie's timing was perfect.

"Look who's come to visit, Dear," said Lovey. "Peter and Stennie. How nice of you boys to stop by." She let Dear mop her forehead with a towel. "What can we do for you?"

The skin under Stennie's jaw quivered. He glanced at me, then at Dear and then at the thick red lips that served as the bathroom door. Never even looked at her. He was losing his nerve.

"Oh my, isn't this exciting, Dear? There's something going on." She sank into the bath until her chin touched the water. "It's a secret, isn't it, Peter? Share it with Lovey."

"No secret," I said, "He wants to ask a favor." And then I told her.

She giggled and sat up. "I love it." Honey-colored oil ran from her hair and slopped between her breasts. "Were you thinking of both of us, Stennie? Or just me?"

"Well, I . . ." Stennie's tail switched. "Maybe we just ought to forget it."

"No, no." She waved a hand at him "Come here, Stennie. Come close, my pretty little monster."

He hesitated, then approached the tub. She reached for his right leg and touched him just above the heelknob. "You know, I've always wondered what scales would feel like." Her hand climbed; the oil made his yellow hide glisten. His eyes were the size of eggs.

The bedroom was all mattress. Beneath the transparent skin was a screen implant, so that Mom could project images not only on the walls but on the surface of the bed itself. Under the window was a layer of heavily vascular flesh, which could be stiffened with blood or drained until it was as soft as raw steak. A window dome arched over everything

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and could show slo-mo or thermographic fx across its span. The air was warm and wet and smelled like a chemical engineer's idea of a rose garden.

I settled by the lips. Dear ghosted along the edges of the room, dragging his umbilical like a chain, never coming quite near enough to touch anyone. I heard him humming as he passed me, a low moaning singsong, as if to block out what was happening. Stennie and Lovey were too busy with each other to care. As Lovey knelt in front of Stennie, Dear gave a mocking laugh. I did not understand how he could be jealous. He was with her, part of it. Lovey and Dear were Mom's remotes, two nodes of her nervous system. Yet his pain was as obvious as her pleasure. At last he squatted and rocked back and forth on his heels. I glanced up at the fx dome; yellow scales slid across oily rolls of flushed skin.

I yawned. I had always found sex kind of dull. Besides, this was all on the record. I could have Comrade replay it for me any time. Lovey stopped breathing—then came four or five shuddering gasps in a row. I wondered where Comrade had gone. I felt sorry for him. Stennie said something to her about rolling over. "Okay?" Feathery skin sounds. A grunt. The soft wet slap of flesh against flesh. I thought of my mother's brain, up there in the head where no one ever went. I had no idea how much attention she was paying. Was she quivering with Lovey and at the same time calculating insolation rates on her chloroplasts? Investing in soy futures on the Chicago Board of Trade? Fending off Weldon Montross's latest attack? *Plug Montross.* I needed to think about something fun. My collection. I started piling bodies up in my mind. The hangings and the open casket funerals and the stacks of dead at the camps and all those muddy soldiers. I shivered as I remembered the empty rigid faces. I liked it when their teeth showed. "Oh, oh, *oh!*" My greatest hits dated from the late twentieth century. The dead were everywhere back then, in vids and the news and even on T-shirts. They were not shy. That was what made Comrade's photo worth having; it was hard to find modern stuff that dirty. Dear brushed by me, his erection bobbing in front of him. It was as big around as my wrist. As he passed I could see Stennie's leg scratch across the mattress skin, which glowed with blood blue light. Lovey giggled beneath him and her umbilical twitched and suddenly I found myself wondering whether Tree was a virgin.

I came into the mall through the Main Street entrance and hopped the westbound slidewalk headed up Elm Street toward the train station. If I caught the 3:36 to Grand Central, I could eat dinner in Manhattan, far from my problems with Montross and Comrade. Running away had always worked for me before. Let someone else clean up the mess while I was gone.

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The slidewalk carried me past a real estate agency, a flash bar, a jewelry store and a Baskin-Robbins. I thought about where I wanted to go after New York. San Francisco? Montreal? Maybe I should try Elkhart, Indiana—no one would think to look for me there. Just ahead, between a drugstore and a take-out Russian restaurant, was the wiseguy dealership where Mom had bought Comrade.

I did not want to think about Comrade waiting for me to come home, so I stepped into the drugstore and bought a dose of Carefree for $4.29. Normally I did not bother with drugs. I had been stunted; no over-the-counter flash could compare to that. But the propyl dicarbamates were all right. I fished the cash card out of my pocket and handed it to the stiff behind the counter. He did a doubletake when he saw the denomination, then carefully inserted the card into the reader to deduct the cost of the Carefree. It had my mom's name on it; he must have expected it would trip some alarm for counterfeit plastic or stolen credit. He stared at me for a moment, as if trying to remember my face so he could describe me to a cop, and then gave the crash card back. The denomination readout said it was still good for $16,381.18.

I picked out a bench in front of a specialty shop called The Happy Hippo, hiked up my shorts and poked Carefree into the widest part of my thigh. I took a short dreamy swim in the sea of tranquility and when I came back to myself, my guilt had been washed away. But so had my energy. I sat for a while and scoped the display of glass hippos and plastic hippos and fuzzy stuffed hippos, hippo vids and sheets and candles. Down the bench from me a homeless woman dozed. It was still pretty early in the season for a weather gypsy to have come this far north. She wore red shorts and droopy red socks with plastic sandals and four long-sleeved shirts, all unbuttoned, over a Funny Honey halter top. Her hair needed vacuuming and she smelled old. All grownups smelled that way to me; it was something I had never gotten used to. No perfume or deodorant could cover up the leathery stink of adulthood. Kids could smell bad, too, but usually from something they got on them. It did not come from a rotting body. I rubbed a finger in the dampness under my arm, slicked it and sniffed. There was a sweetness to kid sweat. I touched the drying finger to my tongue. You could even taste it. If I gave up getting stunted, stopped being Mr. Boy, I would smell like the woman at the end of the bench. I would start to die. I had never understood how grownups could live with that.

The gypsy woke up, stretched and smiled at me with gummy teeth. "You left Comrade behind?" she said.

I was startled. "What did you say?"

"You know what this is?" She twitched her sleeve and a penlight appeared in her hand.

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My throat tightened. "I know what it looks like."

She gave me a wicked smile, aimed the penlight and burned a pinhole through the bench a few centimeters from my leg. "Maybe I could interest you in some free laser surgery?"

I could smell scorched plastic. "You're going to needle me here, in the middle of the Elm Street Mall?" I thought she was bluffing. Probably. I hoped.

"If that's the way you want it. Mr. Montross wants to know when you're delivering the wiseguy to us."

"Get away from me."

"Not until you do what needs to be done."

When I saw Happy Lurdane come out of The Happy Hippo, I waved. A desperation move, but then it was easy to be brave with a head full of Carefree.

"Mr. Boy." She veered over to us. "Hi!"

I scooted farther down the bench to make room for her between me and the gypsy. I knew she would stay to chat. Happy Lurdane was one of those chirpy lightweights who seemed to want lots of friends but did not really try to be one. We tolerated her because she did not mind being snubbed and she threw great parties.

"Where have you been?" She settled beside me. "Haven't seen you in ages." The penlight disappeared and the gypsy fell back into drowsy character.

"Around."

"Want to see what I just bought?"

I nodded. My heart was hammering.

She opened the bag and took out a fist-sized bundle covered with shipping plastic. She unwrapped a statue of a blue hippopotamus. "Be careful." She handed it to me.

"Cute." The hippo had crude flower designs drawn on its body; it was chipped and cracked.

"Ancient Egyptian. That means it's even *before* antique." She pulled a slip from the bag and read. "Twelfth Dynasty, 1991-1786 BC. Can you believe you can just buy something like that here in the mall? I mean it must be like a thousand years old or something."

"Try four thousand."

"No wonder it cost so much. He wasn't going to sell it to me, so I had to spend some of next month's allowance." She took it from me and rewrapped it. "It's for the smash party tomorrow. You're coming, aren't you?"

"Maybe."

"Is something wrong?"

I ignored that.

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"Hey, where's Comrade? I don't think I've ever seen you two apart before."

I decided to take a chance. "Want to get some doboys?"

"*Sure.*" She glanced at me with delighted astonishment. "Are you sure you're all right?"

I took her arm, maneuvering to keep her between me and the gypsy. If Happy got needled it would be no great loss to western civilization. She babbled on about her party as we stepped onto the westbound slidewalk. I turned to look back. The gypsy waved as she hopped the eastbound.

"Look Happy," I said, "I'm sorry, but I changed my mind. Later, okay?"

"But . . ."

I did not stop for an argument. I darted off the slidewalk and sprinted through the mall to the station. I went straight to a ticket window, shoved the cash card under the grill and asked the agent for a one way to Grand Central. Forty thousand people lived in New Canaan; most of them had heard of me because of my mom. Nine million strangers jammed New York City; it was a good place to disappear. The agent had my ticket in her hand when the reader beeped and spat the card out.

"No!" I slammed my fist on the counter. "Try it again." The cash card was guaranteed by AmEx to be secure. And it had just worked at the drug store.

She glanced at the card, then slid it back under the grill. "No use." The denomination readout flashed alternating messages: *Voided* and *Bank recall.* "You've got trouble, son."

She was right. As I left the station, I felt the Carefree struggle one last time with my dread—and lose. I did not even have the money to call home. I wandered around for a while, dazed, and then I was standing in front of the flower shop in the Elm Street Mall.

Green Dream

Contemporary and Conventional Plants

I had telelinked with Tree every day since our drive and every day she had asked me over. But I was not ready to meet her family; I suppose I was still trying to pretend she was not a stiff. I wavered at the door now, breathing the cool scent of damp soil in clay pots. The gypsy could come after me again; I might be putting these people in danger. Using Happy as a shield was one thing, but I liked Tree. A lot. I backed away and peered through a window fringed with sweat and teeming with bizarre plants with flame-colored tongues. Someone wearing khaki moved. I could not tell if it was Tree or not. I thought of what she had said about no one having adventures in the mall.

The front of the showroom was a green cave, darker than I had expected. Baskets dripping with bright flowers hung like stalactites; leath-

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ery-leaved understory plants formed stalagmites. As I threaded my way toward the back I came upon the kid I had seen wearing the Green Dream uniform, a khaki nightmare of pleats and flaps and brass buttons and about six too many pockets. He was misting leaves with a pump bottle filled with blue liquid. I decided he must be the brother.

"Hi," I said. "I'm looking for Treemonisha."

Fidel was shorter than me and darker than his sister. He had a wiry plush of beautiful black hair that I was immediately tempted to touch.

"Are you?" He eyed me as if deciding how hard I would be to beat up, then he smiled. He had crooked teeth. "You don't look like yourself."

"No?"

"What are you, scared? You're whiter than rice, cashman. Don't worry, the stiffs won't hurt you." Laughing, he feinted a punch at my arm; I was not reassured.

"You're Fidel."

"I've seen your DI files," he said. "I asked around, I know about you. So don't be telling my sister any more lies, understand?" He snapped his fingers in my face. "Behave yourself, cashman, and we'll be fine." He still had the boyish excitability I had lost after the first stunting. "She's out back, so first you have to get by the old man."

The rear of the store was brighter; sunlight streamed through the clear krylac roof. There was a counter and behind it a glass-doored refrigerator filled with cut flowers. A side entrance opened to the greenhouse. Mrs. Schlieman, one of Mom's lawyers who had an office in the mall, was deciding what to buy. She was shopping with her wiseguy secretary, who looked like he had just stepped out of a vodka ad.

"Wait." Fidel rested a hand on my shoulder. "I'll tell her you're here."

"But how long will they last?" Mrs. Schlieman sniffed a frilly yellow flower. "I should probably get the duraroses."

"Whatever you want, Mrs. Schlieman. Duraroses are a good product, I sell them by the truckload," said Mr. Joplin with a chuckle. "But these carnations are real flowers, raised here in my greenhouse. So maybe you can't stick them in your dishwasher, but put some where people can touch and smell them and I guarantee you'll get compliments."

"Why Peter Cage," said Mrs. Schlieman. "Is that you? I haven't seen you since the picnic. How's your mother?" She did not introduce her wiseguy.

"Extreme," I said.

She nodded absently. "That's nice. All right then, Mr. Joplin, give me a dozen of your carnations—and two dozen yellow duraroses."

Mrs. Schlieman chatted politely at me while Tree's father wrapped the order. He was a short, rumpled, balding man who smiled too much. He seemed to like wearing the corporate uniform. Anyone else would have

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fixed the hair and the wrinkles. Not Mr. Joplin; he was a museum-quality throwback. As he took Mrs. Schlieman's cash card from the wiseguy, he beamed at me over his glasses. Glasses!

When Mrs. Schlieman left, so did the smile. "Peter Cage?" he said. "Is that your name?"

"Mr. Boy is my name, sir."

"You're Tree's new friend." He nodded. "She's told us about you. She's doing chores just now. You know, we have to work for a living here."

Sure, and I knew what he left unsaid: *unlike you, you spoiled little freak*. It was always the same with these stiffs. I walked in the door and already they hated me. At least he was not pretending, like Mrs. Schlieman. I gave him two points for honesty and kept my mouth shut.

"What is it you want here, Peter?"

"Nothing, sir." If he was going to "Peter" me, I was going to "sir" him right back. "I just stopped by to say hello. Treemonisha did invite me, sir, but if you'd rather I left . . ."

"No, no. Tree warned us you might come."

She and Fidel raced into the room as if they were afraid their father and I would already be at each other's throats. "Oh hi, Mr. Boy," she said.

Her father snorted at the sound of my name.

"Hi." I grinned at her. It was the easiest thing I had done that day.

She was wearing her uniform. When she saw that I had noticed, she blushed. "Well, you asked for it." She tugged self-consciously at the waist of her fatigues. "You want to come in?"

"Just a minute." Mr. Joplin stepped in front of the door, blocking our escape. "You finished E-class?"

"Yes."

"Checked the flats?"

"I'm almost done."

"After that you'd better pick some dinner and get it started. Your mama called and said she wouldn't be home until six-fifteen."

"Sure."

"And you'll take orders for me on line two?"

She leaned against the counter and sighed. "Do I have a choice?"

He backed away and waved us through. "Sorry, sweetheart. I don't know how we would get along without you." He caught her brother by the shirt. "Not you, Fidel. You're misting, remember?"

A short tunnel ran from their mall storefront to the rehabbed furniture warehouse built over the Amtrak rails. Green Dream had installed a krylac roof and fans and a grolighting system; the Joplins squeezed themselves into the leftover spaces not filled with inventory. The air in

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the greenhouse was heavy and warm and it smelled like rain. No walls, no privacy other than that provided by the plants.

"Here's where I sleep." Tree sat on her unmade bed. Her space was formed by a cinder block wall painted yellow and a screen of palms. "Chinese fan, bamboo, lady, date, kentia," she said, naming them for me like they were her pets. "I grow them myself for spending money." Her schoolcomm was on top of her dresser. Several drawers hung open; pink skintights trailed from one. Clothes were scattered like piles of leaves across the floor. "I guess I'm kind of a slob," she said as she stripped off the uniform, wadded it and then banked it off the dresser into the top drawer. I could see her bare back in the mirror plastic taped to the wall. "Take your things off if you want."

I hesitated.

"Or not. But it's kind of muggy to stay dressed. You'll sweat."

I unvelcroed my shirt. I did not mind at all seeing Tree without clothes. But I did not undress for anyone except the stiffs at the clinic. I stepped out of my pants. Being naked somehow had got connected with being helpless. I had this puckery feeling in my dick, like it was going to curl up and die. I could imagine the gypsy popping out from behind a palm and laughing at me. No, I was not going to think about *that*. Not here.

"Comfortable?" said Tree.

"Sure." My voice was turning to dust in my throat. "Do all Green Dream employees run around the back room in the nude?"

"I doubt it." She smiled as if the thought tickled her. "We're not exactly your average mall drones. Come help me finish the chores."

I was glad to let her lead so that she was not looking at me, although I could still watch her. I was fascinated by the sweep of her buttocks, the curve of her spine. She strolled, flatfooted and at ease, through her private jungle. At first I scuttled along on the balls of my feet, ready to dart behind a plant if anyone came. But after a while I decided to stop being so skittish. I realized I would probably survive being naked.

Tree stopped in front of a workbench covered with potted seedlings in plastic trays and picked up a hose from the floor.

"What's this stuff?" I kept to the opposite side of the bench, using it to cover myself.

"Greens." She lifted a seedling to check the water level in the tray beneath.

"What are greens?"

"It's too boring." She squirted some water in and replaced the seedling.

"Tell me, I'm interested."

"In greens? You liar." She glanced at me and shook her head. "Okay." She pointed as she said the names. "Lettuce, spinach, pak choi, chard, kale, rocket—got that? And a few tomatoes over there. Peppers, too. GD

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is trying to break into the food business. They think people will grow more of their own if they find out how easy it is."

"Is it?"

"Greens are." She inspected the next tray. "Just add water."

"Yeah, sure."

"It's because they've been photosynthetically enhanced. Bigger leaves arranged better, low respiration rates. They teach us this stuff at GD Family Camp. It's what we do instead of vacation." She squashed something between her thumb and forefinger. "They mix all these bacteria that make their own fertilizer into the soil—fix nitrogen right out of the air. And then there's this other stuff that sticks to the roots, rhizobacteria and mycorrhizae." She finished the last tray and coiled the hose. "These flats will produce under candlelight in a closet. Bored yet?"

"How do they taste?"

"Pretty bland, most of them. Some stink, like kale and rocket. But we have to eat them for the good of the corporation." She stuck her tongue out. "You want to stay for dinner?"

Mrs. Joplin made me call home before she would feed me; she refused to understand that my mom did not care. So I linked, asked Mom to send a car to the back door at eight-thirty, and faded. No time to discuss the missing sixteen thousand.

Dinner was from the cookbook Tree had been issued at camp: a bowl of cold bean soup, fresh corn bread, and chard and cheese loaf. She let me help her make it, even though I had never cooked before. I was amazed at how simple corn bread was. Six ingredients: flour, corn meal, baking powder, milk, oil, and ovobinder. Mix and pour into a greased pan. Bake 20 minutes at 220 Celsius and serve! There is nothing magic or even very mysterious about homemade corn bread, except for the way its smell held me spellbound.

Supper was the Joplins' daily meal together. They ate in front of security windows near the tunnel to the store; when a customer came, someone ran out front. According to contract, they had to stay open twenty-four hours a day. Many of the suburban malls had gone to all-night operation; the competition from New York City was deadly. Mr. Joplin stood duty most of the time, but since they were a franchise family everybody took turns. Even Mrs. Joplin, who also worked part-time as a factfinder at the mall's DataStop.

Tree's mother was plump and graying and she had a smile that was almost bright enough to distract me from her naked body. She seemed harmless, except that she knew how to ask questions. After all, her job was finding out stuff for DataStop customers. She had this way of locking onto you as you talked; the longer the conversation, the greater her

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intensity. It was hard to lie to her. Normally that kind of aggressiveness in grownups made me jumpy.

No doubt she had run a search on me; I wondered just what she had turned up. Factfinders had to obey the law, so they only accessed public domain information—unlike Comrade, who would cheerfully operate on whatever I set him to. The Joplins' bank records, for instance. I knew that Mrs. Joplin had made about $11,000 last year at the Infomat in the Elkhart Mall, that the family borrowed $135,000 at 9.78 percent interest to move to their new franchise and that they lost $213 in their first two months in New Canaan.

I kept my research a secret, of course, and they acted innocent, too. I let them pump me about Mom as we ate. I was used to being asked; after all, Mom was famous. Fidel wanted to know how much it had cost her to get twanked, how big she was, what she looked like on the inside and what she ate, if she got cold in the winter. Stuff like that. The others asked more personal questions. Tree wondered if Mom ever got lonely and whether she was going to be the Statue of Liberty for the rest of her life. Mrs. Joplin was interested in Mom's remotes, of all things. Which ones I got along with, which ones I could not stand, whether I thought any of them was really her. Mr. Joplin asked if she liked being what she was. How was I supposed to know?

After dinner, I helped Fidel clear the table. While we were alone in the kitchen, he complained. "You think they eat this shit at GD headquarters?" He scraped his untouched chard loaf into the composter.

"I kind of liked the corn bread."

"If only he'd buy meat once in a while, but he's too cheap. Or doboys. Tree says you bought her doboys."

I told him to skip school some time and we would go out for lunch; he thought that was a great idea.

When we came back out, Mr. Joplin actually smiled at me. He had been losing his edge all during dinner. Maybe chard agreed with him. He pulled a pipe from his pocket, began stuffing something into it and asked me if I followed baseball. I told him no. Paintball? No. Basketball? I said I watched dino fights sometimes.

"His pal is the dinosaur that goes to our school," said Fidel.

"He may look like a dinosaur, but he's really a boy," said Mr. Joplin, as if making an important distinction. "The dinosaurs died out millions of years ago."

"Humans aren't allowed in dino fights," I said, just to keep the conversation going. "Only twanked dogs and horses and elephants."

Silence. Mr. Joplin puffed on his pipe and then passed it to his wife. She watched the glow in the bowl through half-lidded eyes as she inhaled. Fidel caught me staring.

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"What's the matter? Don't you get twisted?" He took the pipe in his turn.

I was so croggled I did not know what to say. Even the Marleys had switched to THC inhalers. "But smoking is bad for you." It smelled like a dirty sock had caught fire.

"Hemp is ancient. Natural." Mr. Joplin spoke in a clipped voice as if swallowing his words. "Opens the mind to what's real." When he sighed, smoke poured out of his nose. "We grow it ourselves, you know."

I took the pipe when Tree offered it. Even before I brought the stem to my mouth, the world tilted and I watched myself slide into what seemed very much like an hallucination. Here I was sitting around naked, in the mall, with a bunch of stiffs, smoking antique drugs. And I was enjoying myself. Incredible. I inhaled and immediately the flash hit me; it was as if my brain were an enormous bud, blooming inside my head.

"Good stuff." I laughed smoke and then began coughing.

Fidel refilled my glass with ice water. "Have a sip, cashman."

"Customer." Tree pointed at the window.

"Leave!" Mr. Joplin waved impatiently at him. "Go away." The man on the screen knelt and turned over the price tag on a fern. "Damn." He jerked his uniform from the hook by the door, pulled on the khaki pants and was slithering into the shirt as he disappeared down the tunnel.

"So is Green Dream trying to break into the flash market, too?" I handed the pipe to Mrs. Joplin. There was a fleck of ash on her left breast.

"What we do back here is our business," she said. "We work hard so we can live the way we want." Tree was studying her fingerprints. I realized I had said the wrong thing so I shut up. Obviously, the Joplins were drifting from the lifestyle taught at Green Dream Family Camp.

Fidel announced he was going to school tomorrow and Mrs. Joplin told him no, he could link to E-class as usual, and Fidel claimed he could not concentrate at home, and Mrs. Joplin said he was trying to get out of his chores. While they were arguing, Tree nudged my leg and shot me a *let's leave* look. I nodded.

"Excuse us." She pushed back her chair. "Mr. Boy has got to go home soon."

Mrs. Joplin pointed for her to stay. "You wait until your father gets back," she said. "Tell me, Mr. Boy, have you lived in New Canaan long?"

"All my life," I said.

"How old did you say you were?"

"Mama, he's twenty-five," said Tree. "I told you."

"And what do you do for a living?"

"*Mama,* you promised."

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"Nothing," I said. "I'm lucky, I guess. I don't need to worry about money. If you didn't need to work, would you?"

"Everybody needs work to do," Mrs. Joplin said. "Work makes us real. Unless you have work to do and people who love you, you don't exist."

Talk about twentieth century humanist goop! At another time in another place, I probably would have snapped, but now the words would not come. My brain had turned into a flower; all I could think were daisy thoughts. The Joplins were such a strange combination of fast-forward and rewind. I could not tell what they wanted from me.

"Seventeen dollars and ninety-nine cents," said Mr. Joplin, returning from the storefront. "What's going on in here?" He glanced at his wife and some signal which I did not catch passed between them. He circled the table, came up behind me and laid his heavy hands on my shoulders. I shuddered; I thought for a moment he meant to strangle me.

"I'm not going to hurt you, Peter," he said. "Before you go I have something to say."

"Daddy." Tree squirmed in her chair. Fidel looked uncomfortable, too, as if he guessed what was coming.

"Sure." I did not have much choice.

The weight on my shoulders eased but did not entirely go away. "You should feel the ache in this boy, Ladonna."

"I know," said Mrs. Joplin.

"Hard as plastic." Mr. Joplin touched the muscles corded along my neck. "You get too hard, you snap." He set his thumbs at the base of my skull and kneaded with an easy circular motion. "Your body isn't some machine that you've downloaded into. It's alive. Real. You have to learn to listen to it. That's why we smoke. Hear these muscles? They're screaming." He let his hand slide down my shoulders. "Now listen." His fingertips probed along my upper spine. "Hear that? Your muscles stay tense because you don't trust anyone. You always have to be ready to take a hit and you can't tell where it's coming from. You're rigid and angry and scared. Reality . . . your body is speaking to you."

His voice was as big and warm as his hands. Tree was giving him a look that could boil water but the way he touched me made too much sense to resist.

"We don't mind helping you ease the strain. That's the way Mrs. Joplin and I are. That's the way we brought the kids up. But first you have to admit you're hurting. And then you have to respect us enough to take what we have to give. I don't feel that in you, Peter. You're not ready to give up your pain. You just want us poor stiffs to admire how hard it's made you. We haven't got time for that kind of shit, okay? You learn to listen to yourself and you'll be welcome around here. We'll even call you Mr. Boy, even though it's a damn stupid name."

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No one spoke for a moment.

"Sorry, Tree," he said. "We've embarrassed you again. But we love you, so you're stuck with us." I could feel it in his hands when he chuckled. "I suppose I do get carried away sometimes."

"Sometimes?" said Fidel. Tree just smouldered.

"It's late," said Mrs. Joplin. "Let him go now, Jamaal. His mama's sending a car over."

Mr. Joplin stepped back and I almost fell off my chair from leaning back against him. I stood, shakily. "Thanks for dinner."

Tree stalked through the greenhouse to the rear exit, her hairworks glittering against her bare back. I had to trot to keep up with her. There was no car in sight so we waited at the doorway and I put on my clothes.

"I can't take much more of this." She stared through the little wire glass window in the door, like a prisoner plotting her escape. "I mean, he's *not* a psychologist or a great philosopher or whatever the hell he thinks he is. He's just a pompous mall drone."

"He's not that bad." Actually, I understood what her father had said to me; it was scary. "I like your family."

"You don't have to live with them!" She kept watching at the door. "They promised they'd behave with you; I should have known better. This happens every time I bring someone home." She puffed an imaginary pipe, imitating her father. "Think what you're doing to yourself, you poor fool, and say, isn't it just too bad about modern life? Love, love, love—*fuck!*" She turned to me. "I'm sick of it. People are going to think I'm as sappy and thickheaded as my parents."

"I don't."

"You're lucky. You're rich and your mom leaves you alone. You're New Canaan. My folks are Elkhart, Indiana."

"Being New Canaan is nothing to brag about. So what are you?"

"Not a Joplin." She shook her head. "Not much longer, anyway; I'm eighteen in February. I think your car's here." She held out her arms and hugged me goodbye. "Sorry you had to sit through that. Don't drop me, okay? I like you, Mr. Boy." She did not let go for a while.

Dropping her had never occurred to me; I was not thinking of anything at all except the silkiness of her skin, the warmth of her body. Her breath whispered through my hair and her nipples brushed my ribs and then she kissed me. Just on the cheek but the damage was done. I was stunted. I was not supposed to feel this way about anyone.

Comrade was waiting in the back seat. We rode home in silence; I had nothing to say to him. He would not understand—none of my friends would. They would warn me that all she wanted was to spend some of my money. Or they would make bad jokes about the nudity or the Joplins' mushy realism. No way I could explain the innocence of the way they

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touched one another. *The old man did what to you?* Yeah, and if I wanted a hug at home who was I supposed to ask? Comrade? Lovey? The greeter? Was I supposed to climb up to the head and fall asleep against Mom's doorbone, waiting for it to open, like I used to do when I was really a kid?

The greeter was her usual nonstick self when I got home. She was so glad to see me and she wanted to know where I had been and if I had a good time and if I wanted Cook to make me a snack? Around. Yes. No.

She said the bank had called about some problem with one of the cash cards she had given me, a security glitch which they had taken care of and were very sorry about. Did I know about it and did I need a new card and would twenty thousand be enough? Yes. Please. Thanks.

And that was it. I found myself resenting Mom because she did not have to care about losing sixteen or twenty or fifty thousand dollars. And she had reminded me of my problems when all I wanted to think of was Tree. She was no help to me, never had been. I had things so twisted around that I almost told her about Montross myself, just to get a reaction. Here some guy had tapped our files and threatened my life and she asked if I wanted a snack. Why keep me around if she was going to pay so little attention? I wanted to shock her, to make her take me seriously.

But I did not know how.

The roombrain woke me. "Stennie's calling."

"Mmm."

"Talk to me, Mr. Party Boy." A window opened; he was in his car. "You dead or alive?"

"Asleep." I rolled over. "Time is it?"

"Ten-thirty and I'm bored. Want me to come get you now or should I meet you there?"

"Wha . . . ?"

"Happy's. Don't tell me you forgot. They're doing a *piano*."

"Who cares?" I crawled out of bed and drooped into the bathroom.

"She says she's asking Tree Joplin," Stennie called after me.

"Asking her what?" I came out.

"To the party."

"Is she going?"

"She's your cush." He gave me a toothy smile. "Call back when you're ready. Later." He faded.

"She left a message," said the roombrain. "Half hour ago."

"Tree? You got me up for Stennie and not for her?"

"He's on the list, she's not. Happy called, too."

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"Comrade should've told you. Where is he?" Now I was grouchy. "She's on the list, okay? Give me playback."

Tree seemed pleased with herself. "Hi, this is me. I got myself invited to a smash party this afternoon. You want to go?" She faded.

"That's all? Call her!"

"Both her numbers are busy; I'll set redial. I found Comrade; he's on another line. You want Happy's message?"

"No. Yes."

"You promised, Mr. Boy." Happy giggled. "Look, you really, really don't want to miss this. Stennie's coming and he said I should ask Joplin if I wanted you here. So you've got no excuse."

Someone tugged at her. "Stop that! Sorry, I'm being molested by a thick. . . ." She batted at her assailant. "Mr. Boy, did I tell you that this Japanese reporter is coming to shoot a vid? What?" She turned off camera. "Sure, just like on the nature channel. Wildlife of America. We're all going to be famous. In Japan! This is history, Mr. Boy. And you're . . ."

Her face froze as the redial program finally linked to the Green Dream. The roombrain brought Tree up in a new window. "Oh hi," she said. "You rich boys sleep late."

"What's this about Happy's?"

"She invited me." Tree was recharging her hairworks with a red brush. "I said yes. Something wrong?"

Comrade slipped into the room; I shushed him. "You sure you want to go to a smash party? Sometimes they get a little crazy."

She aimed the brush at me. "You've been to smash parties before. You survived."

"Sure, but . . ."

"Well, I haven't. All I know is that everybody at school is talking about this one and I want to see what it's about."

"You tell your parents you're going?"

"Are you kidding? They'd just say it was too dangerous. What's the matter, Mr. Boy, are you scared? Come on, it'll be extreme."

"She's right. You *should* go," said Comrade.

"Is that Comrade?" Tree said. "You tell him, Comrade!"

I glared at him. "Okay, okay, I guess I'm outnumbered. Stennie said he'd drive. You want us to pick you up?"

She did.

I flew at Comrade as soon as Tree faded. "Don't you ever do that again!" I shoved him and he bumped up against the wall. "I ought to throw you to Montross."

"You know, I just finished chatting with him." Comrade stayed calm and made no move to defend himself. "He wants to meet—the three of us, face to face. He suggested Happy's."

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"He suggested . . . I told you not to talk to him."

"I know." He shrugged. "Anyway, I think we should do it."

"Who gave you permission to think?"

"You did. What if we give him the picture back and open our files and then I grovel, say I'm sorry, it'll never happen again, blah, blah, blah. Maybe we can even buy him off. What have we got to lose?"

"You can't bribe software. And what if he decides to snatch us?" I told Comrade about the gypsy with the penlight. "You want Tree mixed up in this?"

All the expression drained from his face. He did not say anything at first but I had watched his subroutines long enough to know that when he looked this blank, he was shaken. "So we take a risk, maybe we can get it over with," he said. "He's not interested in Tree and I won't let anything happen to you. Why do you think your mom bought me?"

Happy Lurdane lived on the former estate of Philip Johnson, a notorious twentieth century architect. In his will Johnson had arranged to turn his compound into the Philip Johnson Memorial Museum, but after he died his work went out of fashion. The glass skyscrapers in the cities did not age well; they started to fall apart or were torn down because they wasted energy. Nobody visited the museum and it went bankrupt. The Lurdanes had bought the property and made some changes.

Johnson had designed all the odd little buildings on the estate himself. The main house was a shoebox of glass with no inside walls; near it stood a windowless brick guest house. On a pond below was a dock that looked like a Greek temple. Past the circular swimming pool near the houses were two galleries which had once held Johnson's art collection, long since sold off. In Johnson's day, the scattered buildings had been connected only by paths, which made the compound impossible in the frosty Connecticut winters. The Lurdanes had enclosed the paths in clear tubes and commuted in a golf cart.

Stennie told his Alpha not to wait, since the lot was already full and cars were parked well down the driveway. Five of us squeezed out of the car: me, Tree, Comrade, Stennie, and Janet Hoyt. Janet wore a Yankees jersey over pinstriped shorts, Tree was a little overdressed in her silver jaunts, I had on baggies padded to make me seem bigger and Comrade wore his usual window coat. Stennie lugged a box with his swag for the party.

Freddy the Teddy let us in. "Stennie and Mr. Boy!" He reared back on his hindquarters and roared. "Glad I'm not going to be the only beastie here. Hi, Janet. Hi, I'm Freddy," he said to Tree. His pink tongue lolled. "Come in, this way. Fun starts right here. Some kids are swimming and

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there's sex in the guest house. Everybody else is with Happy having lunch in the sculpture gallery."

The interior of the Glass House was bright and hard. Dark wood block floor, some unfriendly furniture, huge panes of glass framed in black painted steel. The few kids in the kitchen were passing an inhaler around and watching a microwave fill up with popcorn.

"I'm hot." Janet stuck the inhaler into her face and pressed. "Anybody want to swim? Tree?"

"Okay." Tree breathed in a polite dose and breathed out a giggle. "You?" she asked me.

"I don't think so." I was too nervous: I kept expecting someone to jump out and throw a net over me. "I'll watch."

"I'd swim with you," said Stennie, "but I promised Happy I'd bring her these party favors as soon as I arrived." He nudged the box with his foot. "Can you wait a few minutes?"

"Comrade and I will take them over." I grabbed the box and headed for the door, glad for the excuse to leave Tree behind while I went to find Montross. "Meet you at the pool."

The golf cart was gone so we walked through the tube toward the sculpture gallery. "You have the picture?" I said.

Comrade patted the pocket of his window coat.

The tube was not air-conditioned and the afternoon sun pounded us through the optical plastic. There was no sound inside; even our footsteps were swallowed by the astroturf. The box got heavier. We passed the entrance to the old painting gallery, which looked like a bomb shelter. Finally I had to break the silence. "I feel strange, being here," I said. "Not just because of the thing with Montross. I really think I lost myself last time I got stunted. Not sure who I am anymore, but I don't think I belong with these kids."

"People change, *tovarisch,*" said Comrade. "Even you."

"Have I changed?"

He smiled. "Now that you've got a cush, your own mother wouldn't recognize you."

"You know what your problem is?" I grinned and bumped up against him on purpose. "You're jealous of Tree."

"Shouldn't I be?"

"Oh, I don't know. I can't tell if Tree likes who I was or who I might be. She's changing, too. She's so hot to break away from her parents, become part of this town. Except that what she's headed for probably isn't worth the trip. I feel like I should protect her, but that means guarding her from people like me, except I don't think I'm Mom's Mr. Boy anymore. Does that make sense?"

"Sure." He gazed straight ahead but all the heads on his window coat

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were scoping me. "Maybe when you're finished changing, you won't need me."

The thought had occurred to me. For years he had been the only one I could talk to but, as we closed on the gallery, I did not know what to say. I shook my head. "I just feel strange."

And then we arrived. The sculpture gallery was designed for show-offs: short flights of steps and a series of stagy balconies descended around the white brick exterior walls to the central exhibition area. The space was open so you could chat with your little knot of friends and, at the same time, spy on everyone else. About thirty kids were eating pizza and crispex off paper plates. At the bottom of the stairs, as advertised, was an black upright piano. Piled beside it was the rest of the swag. A Boston rocker, a case of green Coke bottles, a Virgin Mary in half a blue bathtub, a huge conch shell, china and crystal and assorted smaller treasures, including a four-thousand-year-old ceramic hippo. There were real animals, too, in cages near the gun rack: a turkey, some stray dogs and cats, turtles, frogs, assorted rodents.

I was threading my way across the first balcony when I was stopped by the Japanese reporter, who was wearing microcam eyes.

"Excuse me, please," he said, "I am Matsuo Shikibu and I will be recording this event today for Nippon Hoso Kyokai. Public telelink of Japan." He smiled and bowed. When his head came up the red light between his lenses was on. "You are . . . ?"

"Raskolnikov," said Comrade, edging between me and the camera. "Rodeo Raskolnikov." He took Shikibu's hand and pumped it. "And my associate here, Mr. Peter Pan." He turned as if to introduce me but we had long since choreographed this dodge. As I sidestepped past, he kept shielding me from the reporter with his body. "We're friends of the bride," Comrade said, "and we're really excited to be making new friends in your country. Banzai, Nippon!"

I slipped by them and scooted downstairs. Happy was basking by the piano; she spotted me as I reached the middle landing.

"Mr. Boy!" It was not so much a greeting as an announcement. She was wearing a body mike and her voice boomed over the sound system. "You made it."

The stream of conversation rippled momentarily, a few heads turned and then the party flowed on. Shikibu rushed to the edge of the upper balcony and caught me with a long shot.

I set the box on the Steinway. "Stennie brought this."

She opened it eagerly. "Look everyone!" She held up a stack of square cardboard albums, about thirty centimeters on a side. There were pictures of musicians on the front, words on the back. "What are they?" she asked me.

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"Phonograph records," said the kid next to Happy. "It's how they used to play music before digital."

"Erroll Garner *Soliloquy*," she read aloud. "What's this? D-j-a-n-g-o Reinhardt and the American Jazz Giants. Sounds scary." She giggled as she pawed quickly through the other albums. Handy, Ellington, Hawkins, Parker, three Armstrongs. One was *Piano Rags By Scott Joplin*. Stennie's bent idea of a joke? Maybe the lizard was smarter than he looked. Happy pulled a black plastic record out of one sleeve and scratched a fingernail across little ridges. "Oh, a non-slip surface."

The party had a limited attention span. When she realized she had lost her audience, she shut off the mike and put the box with the rest of the swag. "We have to start at four, no matter what. There's so much stuff." The kid who knew about records wormed into our conversation; Happy put her hand on his shoulder. "Mr. Boy, do you know my friend, Weldon?" she said. "He's new."

Montross grinned. "We met on Playroom."

"Where *is* Stennie, anyway?" said Happy.

"Swimming," I said. Montross appeared to be in his late teens. Bigger than me—everyone was bigger than me. He wore green shorts and a window shirt of surfers at Waimea. He looked like everybody; there was nothing about him to remember. I considered bashing the smirk off his face but it was a bad idea. If he was software he could not feel anything and I would probably break my hand on his temporary chassis. "Got to go. I promised Stennie I'd meet him back at the pool. Hey Weldon, want to tag along?"

"You come right back," said Happy. "We're starting at four. Tell everyone."

We avoided the tube and cut across the lawn for privacy. Comrade handed Montross the envelope. He slid the photograph out and I had one last glimpse. This time the dead man left me cold. In fact, I was embarrassed. Although he kept a straight face, I knew what Montross was thinking about me. Maybe he was right. I wished he would put the picture away. He was not one of us; he could not understand. I wondered if Tree had come far enough yet to appreciate corpse porn.

"It's the only copy," Comrade said.

"All right." Finally Montross crammed it into the pocket of his shorts.

"You tapped our files; you know it's true."

"So?"

"So enough!" I said. "You have what you wanted."

"I've already explained." Montross was being patient. "Getting this back doesn't close the case. I have to take preventive measures."

"Meaning you turn Comrade into a carrot."

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"Meaning I repair him. You're the one who took him to the chop shop. Deregulated wiseguys are dangerous. Maybe not to you, but certainly to property and probably to other people. It's a straightforward procedure. He'll be fully functional afterward."

"Plug your procedure, jack. We're leaving."

Both wiseguys stopped. "I thought you agreed," said Montross.

"Let's go, Comrade." I grabbed his arm but he shook me off.

"Where?" he said.

"Anywhere! Just so I never have to listen to this again." I pulled again, angry at Comrade for stalling. Your wiseguy is supposed to anticipate your needs, do whatever you want.

"But we haven't even tried to . . ."

"Forget it then. I give up." I pushed him toward Montross. "You want to chat, fine, go right ahead. Let him rip the top of your head off while you're at it, but I'm not sticking around to watch."

I checked the pool but Tree, Stennie, and Janet had already gone. I went through the Glass House and caught up with them in the tube to the sculpture gallery.

"Can I talk to you?" I put my arm around Tree's waist, just like I had seen grownups do. "In private." I could tell she was annoyed to be separated from Janet. "We'll catch up." I waved Stennie on. "See you over there."

She waited until they were gone. "What?" Her hair, slick from swimming, left dark spots where it brushed her silver jaunts.

"I want to leave. We'll call my mom's car." She did not look happy. "I'll take you anywhere you want to go."

"But we just got here. Give it a chance."

"I've been to too many of these things."

"Then you shouldn't have come."

Silence. I wanted to tell her about Montross—everything—but not here. Anyone could come along and the tube was so hot. I was desperate to get her away, so I lied. "Believe me, you're not going to like this. I know." I tugged at her waist. "Sometimes even I think smash parties are too much."

"We've had this discussion before," she said. "Obviously you weren't listening. I don't need you to decide for me whether I'm going to like something, Mr. Boy. I have two parents too many; I don't need another." She stepped away from me. "Hey, I'm sorry if you're having a bad time. But do you really need to spoil it for me?" She turned and strode down the tube toward the gallery, her beautiful hair slapping against her back. I watched her go.

"But I'm in trouble," I muttered to the empty tube—and then was disgusted with myself because I did not have the guts to say it to Tree.

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I was too scared she would not care. I stood there, sweating. For a moment the stink of doubt filled my nostrils. Then I followed her in. I could not abandon her to the extremists.

The gallery was jammed now; maybe a hundred kids swarmed across the balconies and down the stairs. Some perched along the edges, their feet scuffing the white brick. Happy had turned up the volume.

". . . according to Guinness, was set at the University of Oklahoma in Norman, Oklahoma, in 2012. Three minutes and fourteen seconds." The crowd rumbled in disbelief. "The challenge states each piece must be small enough to pass through a hole thirty centimeters in diameter."

I worked my way to an opening beside a rubber tree. Happy posed on the keyboard of the piano. Freddy the Teddy and the gorilla brothers, Mike and Bubba, lined up beside her. "No mechanical tools are allowed." She gestured at an armory of axes, sledgehammers, spikes, and crowbars laid out on the floor. A paper plate spun across the room. I could not see Tree.

"This piano is over two hundred years old," Happy continued, "which means the white keys are ivory." She plunked a note. "Dead elephants!" Everybody heaved a sympathetic *awww*. "The blacks are ebony, hacked from the rain forest." Another note, less reaction. "It deserves to die."

Applause. Comrade and I spotted each other at almost the same time. He and Montross stood toward the rear of the lower balcony. He gestured for me to come down; I ignored him.

"Do you boys have anything to say?" Happy said.

"Yeah." Freddy hefted an ax. "Let's make landfill."

I ducked around the rubber tree and heard the *crack* of splitting wood, the iron groan of a piano frame yielding its last music. The spectators hooted approval. As I bumped past kids, searching for Tree, the instrument's death cry made me think of taking a hammer to Montross. If fights broke out, no one would care if Comrade and I dragged him outside. I wanted to beat him until he shuddered and came unstrung and his works glinted in the thudding August light. It would make me feel extreme again. *Crunch!* Kids shrieked, "Go, go, go!" The party was lifting off and taking me with it.

"You are Mr. Boy Cage." Abruptly Shikibu's microcam eyes were in my face. "We know your famous mother." He had to shout to be heard. "I have a question."

"Go away."

"Thirty seconds." A girl's voice boomed over the speakers.

"U.S. and Japan are very different, yes?" He pressed closer. "We honor ancestors, our past. You seem to hate so much." He gestured at the gallery. "Why?"

"Maybe we're spoiled." I barged past him.

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I saw Freddy swing a sledgehammer at the exposed frame. *Clang!* A chunk of twisted iron clattered across the brick floor, trailing broken strings. Happy scooped the mess up and shoved it through a thirty centimeter hole drilled in an upright sheet of particle board.

The timekeeper called out again. *"One minute."* I had come far enough around the curve of the stairs to see her.

"Treemonisha!"

She glanced up, her face alight with pleasure, and waved. I was frightened for her. She was climbing into the same box I needed to break out of. So I rushed down the stairs to rescue her—little boy knight in shining armor—and ran right into Comrade's arms.

"I've decided," he said. *"Mnye vcyaw ostoyeblo."*

"Great." I had to get to Tree. "Later, okay?" When I tried to go by, he picked me up. I started thrashing. It was the first fight of the afternoon and I lost. He carried me over to Montross. The gallery was in an uproar.

"All set," said Montross. "I'll have to borrow him for a while. I'll drop him off tonight at your mom. Then we're done."

"Done?" I kept trying to get free but Comrade crushed me against him.

"It's what you want." His body was so hard. "And what your mom wants."

"Mom? She doesn't even know."

"She knows everything," Comrade said. "She watches you constantly. What else does she have to do all day?" He let me go. "Remember you said I was sloppy getting the picture? I wasn't; it was a clean operation. Only someone tipped Datasafe off."

"But she promised. Besides that makes no . . ."

"Two minutes," Tree called.

". . . but he threatened me," I said. "He was going to blow me up. Needle me in the mall."

"We wouldn't do that." Montross spread his hands innocently. "It's against the law."

"Yeah? Well, then drop dead, jack." I poked a finger at him. "Deal's off."

"No, it's not," said Comrade. "It's too late. This isn't about the picture anymore, Mr. Boy; it's about you. You weren't supposed to change but you did. Maybe they botched the last stunting, maybe it's Treemonisha. Whatever, you've outgrown me, the way I am now. So I have to change, too, or else I'll keep getting in your way."

He always had everything under control; it made me crazy. He was too good at running my life. "You should have told me Mom turned you in." *Crash!* I felt like the crowd was inside my head, screaming.

"You could've figured it out, if you wanted to. Besides, if I had said anything, your mom wouldn't have bothered to be subtle. She would've

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squashed me. She still might, even though I'm being fixed. Only by then I won't care. *Rosproyebi tvayou mat!"*

I heard Tree finishing the count. "*. . . twelve, thirteen, fourteen!"* No record today. Some kids began to boo, others laughed. "Time's up, you losers!"

I glared at the two wiseguys. Montross was busy emulating sincerity. Comrade found a way to grin for me, the same smirk he always wore when he tortured the greeter. "It's easier this way."

Easier. My life was too plugging easy. I had never done anything important by myself. Not even grow up. I wanted to smash something.

"Okay," I said. "You asked for it."

Comrade turned to Montross and they shook hands. I thought next they might clap one another on the shoulder and whistle as they strolled off into the sunset together. I felt like puking. "Have fun," said Comrade. *"Da svedanya."*

"Sure." Betraying Comrade, my best friend, brought me both pain and pleasure at once—but not enough to satisfy the shrieking wildness within me. The party was just starting.

Happy stood beaming beside the ruins of the Steinway. Although nothing of what was left was more than half a meter tall, Freddy, Mike and Bubba had given up now that the challenge was lost. Kids were already surging down the stairs to claim their share of the swag. I went along with them.

"Don't worry," announced Happy. "Plenty for everyone. Come take what you like. Remember, guns and animals outside, if you want to hunt. The safeties won't release unless you go through the door. Watch out for one another, people, we don't want anyone shot."

A bunch of kids were wrestling over the turkey cage; one of them staggered backwards and knocked into me. "Gobble, gobble," she said. I shoved her back.

"Mr. Boy! Over here." Tree, Stennie, and Janet were waiting on the far side of the gallery. As I crossed to them, Happy gave the sign and Stone Kinkaid hurled the four thousand year old ceramic hippo against the wall. It shattered. Everybody cheered. In the upper balconies, they were playing catch with a frog.

"You see who kept time?" said Janet.

"Didn't need to see," I said. "I could hear. They probably heard in Elkhart. So you like it, Tree?"

"It's about what I expected: dumb but fun. I don't think they . . . " The frog sailed from the top balcony and splatted at our feet. Its legs twitched and guts spilled from its open mouth. I watched Tree's smile turn brittle. She seemed slightly embarrassed, as if she had just been told the price of something she could not afford.

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"This is going to be a war zone soon," Stennie said.

"Yeah, let's fade." Janet towed Stennie to the stairs, swerving around the three boys lugging Our Lady of the Bathtub out to the firing range.

"Wait." I blocked Tree. "You're here, so you have to destroy something. Get with the program."

"I have to?" She seemed doubtful. "Oh all right—but no animals."

A hail of antique Coke bottles crashed around Happy as she directed traffic at the dwindling swag heap. "Hey people, please be very careful where you throw things." Her amplified voice blasted us as we approached. The first floor was a graveyard of broken glass and piano bones and bloody feathers. Most of the good stuff was already gone.

"Any records left?" I said.

Happy wobbled closer to me. "What?" She seemed punchy, as if stunned by the success of her own party.

"The box I gave you. From Stennie." She pointed; I spotted it under some cages and grabbed it. Tree and the others were on the stairs. Outside I could hear the crackle of small arms fire. I caught up.

"Sir! Mr. Dinosaur, please." The press still lurked on the upper balcony. "Matsuo Shikibu, Japanese telelink NHK. Could I speak with you for a moment?"

"Excuse me, but this jack and I have some unfinished business." I handed Stennie the records and cut in front. He swayed and lashed his tail upward to counterbalance their weight.

"Remember me?" I bowed to Shikibu.

"My apologies if I offended . . ."

"Hey, Matsuo—can I call you Matsuo? This is your first smash party, right? Please, eyes on me. I want to explain why I was rude before. Help you understand the local customs. You see, we're kind of self-conscious here in the U.S. We don't like it when someone just watches while we play. You either join in or you're not one of us."

My little speech drew a crowd. "What's he talking about?" said Janet. She was shushed.

"So if you drop by our party and don't have fun, people resent you," I told him. "No one came here today to put on a show. This is who we are. What we believe in."

"Yeah!" Stennie was cheerleading for the extreme Mr. Boy of old. "Tell him." Too bad he did not realize it was his final appearance. What was Mr. Boy without his Comrade? "Make him feel some pain."

I snatched an album from the top of the stack, slipped the record out and held close it to Shikibu's microcam eyes. "What does this say?"

He craned his neck to read the label. "John Coltrane, *Giant Steps.*"

"Very good." I grasped the record with both hands, and raised it over my head for all to see. "We're not picky, Matsuo. We welcome everyone.

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Therefore today it is my honor to initiate you—and the home audience back on NHK. If you're still watching, you're part of this too." I broke the record over his head.

He yelped and staggered backward and almost tripped over a dead cat. Stone Kinkaid caught him and propped him up. "Congratulations," said Stennie, as he waved his claws at Japan. "You're all extremists now."

Shikibu gaped at me, his microcam eyes askew. A couple of kids clapped.

"There's someone else here who has not yet joined us." I turned on Tree. "Another spectator." Her smile faded.

"You leave her alone," said Janet. "What are you, crazy?"

"I'm not going to touch her." I held up empty hands. "No, I just want her to ruin something. That's why you came, isn't it, Tree? To get a taste?" I rifled through the box until I found what I wanted. "How about this?" I thrust it at her.

"Oh yeah," said Stennie, "I meant to tell you. . . ."

She took the record and scoped it briefly. When she glanced up at me, I almost lost my nerve.

"Matsuo Shikibu, meet Treemonisha Joplin." I clasped my hands behind my back so no one could see me tremble. "The great-great-great granddaughter of the famous American composer, Scott Joplin. Yes, Japan, we're all celebrities here in New Canaan. Now please observe." I read the record for him. "*Piano Rags by Scott Joplin,* Volume III. Who knows, this might be the last copy. We can only hope. So, what are you waiting for, Tree? You don't want to be a Joplin anymore? Just wait until your folks get a peek at this. We'll even send GD a copy. Go ahead, enjoy."

"Smash it!" The kids around us took up the chant. "Smash it!" Shikibu adjusted his lenses.

"You think I won't?" Tree pulled out the disc and threw the sleeve off the balcony. "This is a piece of junk, Mr. Boy." She laughed and then shattered the album against the wall. She held onto a shard. "It doesn't mean anything to me."

I heard Janet whisper. "What's going on?"

"I think they're having an argument."

"You want me to be your little dream cush." Tree tucked the piece of broken plastic into the pocket of my baggies. "The stiff from nowhere who knows nobody and does nothing without Mr. Boy. So you try to scare me off. You tell me you're so rich, you can afford to hate yourself. Stay home, you say, it's too dangerous, we're all crazy. Well, if you're so sure this is poison, how come you've still got your wiseguy and your cash cards? Are you going to move out of your mom, leave town, stop getting stunted? You're not giving it up, Mr. Boy, so why should I?"

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Shikibu turned his camera eyes on me. No one spoke.

"You're right," I said. "She's right." I could not save anyone until I saved myself. I felt the wildness lifting me to it. I leapt onto the balcony wall and shouted for everyone to hear. "Shut up and listen everybody! You're all invited to my place, okay?"

There was one last thing to smash.

"Stop this, Peter." The greeter no longer thought I was cute. "What're you doing?" She trembled as if the kids spilling into her were an infection.

"I thought you'd like to meet my friends," I said. A few had stayed behind with Happy, who had decided to sulk after I hijacked her guests. The rest had followed me home in a caravan so I could warn off the sentry robots. It was already a hall-of-fame bash. "Treemonisha Joplin, this is my mom. Sort of."

"Hi," Tree held out her hand uncertainly.

The greeter was no longer the human doormat. "Get them out of me." She was too jumpy to be polite. "Right now!"

Someone turned up a boombox. Skitter music filled the room like a siren. Tree said something I could not hear. When I put a hand to my ear, she leaned close and said, "Don't be so mean, Mr. Boy. I think she's really frightened."

I grinned and nodded. "I'll tell cook to make us some snacks."

Bubba and Mike carried boxes filled with the last of the swag and set them on the coffee table. Kids fanned out, running their hands along her wrinkled blood-hot walls, bouncing on the furniture. Stennie waved at me as he led a bunch upstairs for a tour. A leftover cat had gotten loose and was hissing and scratching underfoot. Some twisted kids had already stripped and were rolling in the floor hair, getting ready to have sex.

"Get dressed, you." The greeter kicked at them as she coiled her umbilical to keep it from being trampled. She retreated to her wall plug. "You're *hurting* me." Although her voice rose to a scream, only half a dozen kids heard her. She went limp and sagged to the floor.

The whole room seemed to throb, as if to some great heartbeat, and the lights went out. It took a while for someone to kill the sound on the boombox. "What's wrong?" Voices called out. "Mr. Boy? Lights."

Both doorbones swung open and I saw a bughead silhouetted against the twilit sky. Shikibu in his microcams. "Party's over," Mom said over her speaker system. There was nervous laughter. "Leave before I call the cops. Peter, go to your room right now. I want to speak to you."

As the stampede began, I found Tree's hand. "Wait for me?" I pulled her close. "I'll only be a minute."

"What are you going to do?" She sounded frightened. It felt good to be taken so seriously.

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"I'm moving out, chucking all this. I'm going to be a working stiff." I chuckled. "Think your dad would give me a job?"

"Look out, dumbscut! Hey, *hey*. Don't push!"

Tree dragged me out of the way. "You're crazy."

"I know. That's why I have to get out of Mom."

"Listen," she said, "you've never been poor, you have no idea. . . . Only a rich kid would think it's easy being a stiff. Just go up, apologize, tell her it won't happen again. Then change things later on, if you want. Believe me, life will be a lot simpler if you hang onto the money."

"I can't. Will you wait?"

"You want me to tell you it's okay to be stupid, is that it? Well, I've *been* poor, Mr. Boy, and still am, and I don't recommend it. So don't expect me to stand around and clap while you throw away something I've always wanted." She spun away from me and I lost her in the darkness. I wanted to catch up with her but I knew I had to do Mom now or I would lose my nerve.

As I was fumbling my way upstairs I heard stragglers coming down. "On your right," I called. Bodies nudged by me.

"Mr. Boy, is that you?" I recognized Stennie's voice.

"He's gone," I said.

Seven flights up, the lights were on. Nanny waited on the landing outside my rooms, her umbilical stretched nearly to its limit. She was the only remote which was physically able to get to my floor and this was as close as she could come.

It had been a while since I had seen her; Mom did not use her much anymore and I rarely visited, even though the nursery was only one flight down. But this was the remote who used to pick me up when I cried and who had changed my diapers and who taught me how to turn on my roombrain. She had skin so pale you could almost see veins and long black hair piled high on her head. I never thought of her as having a body because she always wore dark turtlenecks and long woolen skirts and silky panty hose. Nanny was a smile and warm hands and the smell of fresh pillowcases. Once upon a time I thought her the most beautiful creature in the world. Back then I would have done anything she said.

She was not smiling now. "I don't know how you expect me to trust you anymore, Peter." Nanny had never been a very good scold. "Those brats were out of control. I can't let you put me in danger this way."

"If you wanted someone to trust, maybe you shouldn't have had me stunted. You got exactly what you ordered, the neverending kid. Well, kids don't have to be responsible."

"What do you mean, what I ordered? It's what you wanted, too."

"Is it? Did you ever ask? I was only ten, the first time, too young to know better. For a long time I did it to please you. Getting stunted was

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the only thing I did that seemed important to you. But *you* never explained. You never sat me down and said 'This is the life you'll have and this is what you'll miss and this is how you'll feel about it.' "

"You want to grow up, is that it?" She was trying to threaten me. "You want to work and worry and get old and die someday?" She had no idea what we were talking about.

"I can't live this way anymore, Nanny."

At first she acted stunned, as if I had spoken in Albanian. Then her expression hardened when she realized she had lost her hold on me. She was ugly when she was angry. "They put you up to this." Her gaze narrowed in accusation. "That little black cush you've been seeing. Those realists!"

I had always managed to hide my anger from Mom. Right up until then. "How do you know about her?" I had never told her about Tree.

"Peter, they live in a mall!"

Comrade was right. "You've been spying on me." When she did not deny it, I went berserk. "You liar." I slammed my fist into her belly. "You said you wouldn't watch." She staggered and fell onto her umbilical, crimping it. As she twitched on the floor, I pounced. "You promised." I slapped her face. "Promised." I hit her again. Her hair had come undone and her eyes rolled back in their sockets and her face was slack. She made no effort to protect herself. Mom was retreating from this remote, too, but I was not going to let her get away.

"Mom!" I rolled off Nanny. "I'm coming up, Mom! You hear? Get ready." I was crying; it had been a long time since I had cried. Not something Mr. Boy did.

I scrambled up to the long landing at the shoulders. At one end another circular stairway wound up into the torch; in the middle four steps led into the neck. It was the only doorbone I had never seen open; I had no idea how to get through.

"Mom, I'm here." I pounded. "Mom! You hear me?"

Silence.

"Let me in, Mom." I smashed myself against the doorbone. Pain branched through my shoulder like lightning but it felt great because Mom shuddered from the impact. I backed up and, in a frenzy, hurled myself again. Something warm dripped on my cheek. She was bleeding from the hinges. I aimed a vicious kick at the doorbone and it banged open. I went through.

For years I had imagined that if only I could get into the head I could meet my real mother. Touch her. I had always wondered what she looked like; she got reshaped just after I was born. When I was little I used to think of her as a magic princess glowing with fairy light. Later I pictured her as one or another of my friends' moms, only better dressed. After I

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had started getting twanked, I was afraid she might be just a brain floating in nutrient solution, like in some pricey memory bank. All wrong.

The interior of the head was dark and absolutely freezing. There was no sound except for the hum of refrigeration units. "Mom?" My voice echoed in the empty space. I stumbled and caught myself against a smooth wall. Not skin, like everywhere else in Mom—metal. The tears froze on my face.

"There's nothing for you here," she said. "This is a clean room. You're compromising it. You must leave immediately."

Sterile environment, metal walls, the bitter cold that superconductors needed. I did not need to see. No one lived here. It had never occurred to me that there was no Mom to touch. She had downloaded, become an electron ghost tripping icy logic gates. "How long have you been dead?"

"This isn't where you belong," she said.

I shivered. "How long?"

"Go away," she said.

So I did. I had to. I could not stay very long in her secret place or I would die of the cold.

As I reeled down the stairs, Mom herself seemed to shift beneath my feet and I saw her as if she were a stranger. Dead—and I had been living in a tomb. I ran past Nanny; she still sprawled where I had left her. All those years I had loved her, I had been in love with death. Mom had been sucking life from me the way her refrigerators stole the warmth from my body.

Now I knew there was no way I could stay, no matter what anyone said. I knew it was not going to be easy leaving, and not just because of the money. For a long time Mom had been my entire world. But I could not let her use me to pretend she was alive, or I would end up like her.

I realized now that the door had always stayed locked because Mom had to hide what she had become. If I wanted, I could have destroyed her. Downloaded intelligences have no more rights than cars or wiseguys. Mom was legally dead and I was her only heir. I could have had her shut off, her body razed. But somehow it was enough to go, to walk away from my inheritance. I was scared and yet with every step I felt lighter. Happier. Extremely free.

I had not expected to find Tree waiting at the doorbone, chatting with Comrade as if nothing had happened. "I just had to see if you were really the biggest fool in the world," she said.

"Out." I pulled her through the door. "Before I change my mind."

Comrade started to follow us. "No, not you." I turned and stared back at the heads on his window coat. I had not intended to see him again;

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I had wanted to be gone before Montross returned him. "Look, I'm giving you back to Mom. She needs you more than I do."

If he had argued, I might have given in. The old, unregulated Comrade would have said something. But he just slumped a little and nodded and I knew that he was dead, too. The thing in front of me was another ghost. He and Mom were two of a kind. "Pretend you're her kid, maybe she'll like that." I patted his shoulder.

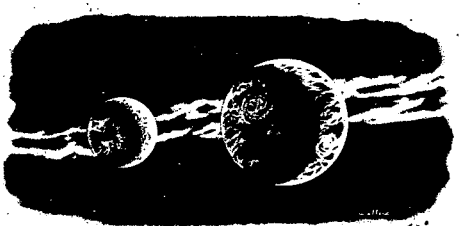
"Prekrassnaya ideya," he said. *"Spaceba."*

"You're welcome," I said.

Tree and I trotted together down the long driveway. Robot sentries crossed the lawn and turned their spotlights on us. I wanted to tell her she was right. I had probably just done the single most irresponsible thing of my life—and I had high standards. Still, I could not imagine how being poor could be worse than being rich and hating yourself. I had seen enough of what it was like to be dead. It was time to try living.

"Are we going someplace, Mr. Boy?" Tree squeezed my hand. "Or are we just wandering around in the dark?"

"Mr. Boy is a damn stupid name, don't you think?" I laughed. "Call me Pete." I felt like a kid again. ●



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ON BOOKS by Norman Spinrad

ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL

Buying Time, Joe Haldeman, Morrow, $18.95 (hc)
Sunglasses After Dark, Nancy A. Collins, NAL/Onyx, $3.95 (pb)
On My Way to Paradise, Dave Wolverton, Bantam/Spectra, $4.95 (pb)
Hyperion, Dan Simmons, Foundation/Doubleday, $18.95 (hc) / $6.95 (pb)
Red Prophet, Orson Scott Card, TOR, $17.95 (hc) / $3.95 (pb)

As a writer, critic, sometime teacher of writing, and as just another reader looking for something that leaves me satisfied, I've come to notice that most novels that leave me dissatisfied, partially satisfied, or royally pissed off, do so because they end badly.

I'm not talking about manuscripts that one reads in writers, workshops, or stuff that editors reject, or published books that I give up on after a chapter or two because the style is tedious or the story is obviously one that I've read a hundred times before. I'm talking about novels that are written well enough, with characters that are engaging enough, and a story that is interesting enough, to keep me reading straight through to the end, and then leave me feeling emotionally and esthetically cheated, like good sex that somehow manages to, uh, peter out short of orgasm.

This applies to short stories, too, but since short stories, by their very nature, rely much more heavily than novels upon a single successful final effect, much fewer well-written short stories that end up nowhere manage to find their way into print. Although admittedly, what with the endless anthologies of "shared universe" stories being published these days, that is not quite as true as it used to be, for reasons that will become apparent, if they are not apparent already.

What constitutes a satisfying ending? That depends partially on the general expectations a reader brings to a story or novel, and partially upon the specific expectations that the writer builds up in the course of telling the tale before it arrives there.

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For the devotee of relatively unsophisticated action-adventure stuff, a satisfying ending is a happy ending in which the hero finally thrashes the villain and gets the girl. This ending satisfies the action-adventure reader for two reasons, one of them a good deal more subtle than the other.

Action-adventure fiction is formula fiction, and the formula consists of establishing a psychic identification between the reader and a lead character, running the hero through a series of confrontations with a villain, or, more subtly, with a frustrating situation, a series of secondary tensions and partial releases that build up into the greatest tension of all, which is released at the climactic moment of triumph, leaving the reader identifying with the hero's apotheosis and feeling like he's just won the heavyweight championship of the galaxy.

If this sounds suspiciously like a literal mindfuck, well, it is. The harmonic parameters are more or less identical to the harmonic parameters of a proper lay.

As the man banging himself on the head with a mallet explained, I do it because it feels so good when I stop, which is why readers can enjoy identifying with a hero who suffers the punishments of an evil villain for the bulk of the reading experience.

"What's right is what you feel good after," Ernest Hemingway put it somewhat more elegantly, and the action-adventure reader certainly feels good after the vicarious pleasure of finally turning the tables on his fictional tormentors and hammering the bastards into the ground himself.

But Hemingway was making a *moral* point, and the more subtle reason why the well-done action-adventure formula ending satisfies is that it assures the readers that the universe is indeed morally just, that the doer of evil deeds will in the end gain no satisfaction therefrom, and that the virtuous man or woman, to wit themselves, will indeed end up feeling good for having done right.

This is why there are still so many World War II stories and films still pleasing audiences, and why World War II is often nostalgically referred to as the "Last Good War."

It was the last war that really fulfilled the action adventure formula. In Adolf Hitler and the Nazis, it had villains far more perfectly evil than any novelist would have dared to invent, the Ultimate Black Barts who annihilated whole cities and threw people into gas ovens in their totally amoral and totally ruthless passion to enslave the world. For the first two thirds of the story, they swept all before them, and then the champions of right, the defenders of civilization, pounded them to a pulp from the air and ground what was left to rubble beneath the treads of their tanks.

This is also why World War II has been the template for so many

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science fiction and fantasy novels, why Darth Vader wore nice shiny SS black, why Sauron is more or less painted as Satan in *The Lord of the Rings* and why, in the film version of *Dune*, David Lynch gave the Baron Harkonnen disgusting pustules and had the Beast Rabbin squash a cute mammal in a wine glass in order to drink the blood. When you're trying to convince your audience that your Black Hat is the moral equivalent of Adolf Hitler, you really better pull out all the stops!

Those of us who are not quite so convinced that moral justice is built into the universe require something somewhat more complex and subtle in a satisfying ending to a tale than being the hero who finally wins World War II. We require an ending that arises out of the natures of the characters, their interactions, and the events of the story—which is to say the plot—and resolves the story in terms of the theme that the writer has made the spiritual and intellectual core of the work.

We're not interested so much in being reassured that good always defeats evil, a proposition which we frequently see violated in the real world, as in being taught something, being made to feel something, that reveals some insight into the nature of the morally imperfect universe in which we unfortunately happen to find ourselves.

Now, while achieving this effect may seem a much more difficult writing task than describing how the hero skewers the villain in the climatic swordfight, it is also a good deal less specific in its requirements, meaning that while there is only one real right way to end an action-adventure tale, there are an infinite number of other ways to successfully conclude a novel. Admittedly, it also means that there are an infinite number of ways to fail.

But that's one of the things that makes good fiction, or sometimes even fiction that is only trying to be good, so much more interesting than the action-adventure format. If the writer isn't a complete boob, and if the editor isn't totally out to lunch, you know how an action-adventure novel is going to end before you pick it up.

With a novel that is not following the familiar moral formula, however, you don't know where you're going when you start, and if it's good, you can't guess the ending till you come to it.

And then, if it's *really* good, if the ending which you have not anticipated nevertheless is revealed as being more or less inevitable, as arising out of a confluence of the character dynamics, the events of the plot, the nature of the universe in which the story is told, and the thematic point the writer has created all that has gone before to elucidate, why then you have a true satori, closure, the resolution of the symphony in the final chord, a work of fiction that lives on in the heart and mind.

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With science fiction, or for that matter with certain kinds of fantasy, such a successful resolution doesn't even have to involve the vanquishment of evil, the overcoming of a threat, or even the survival of jeopardy.

Science fiction in particular is suited to resolutions that are intellectual, as in much of Isaac Asimov's best work, and not just in the Lije Bailey–R. Daneel Olivaw science fiction mysteries, where, as in all mysteries, the climax has to be an intellectual event, the solution thereof.

Much hard science fiction—and a lot of science fiction that isn't so hard—has at its thematic heart the consequences to its characters of new scientific discoveries, an alteration in the technosphere, a confrontation with alien environments or alien consciousnesses, which creates in the reader at least the illusion of having experienced the world anew or even having been a new kind of creature themselves, and, at the end, if it is a good one, of achieving a kind of intellectual and emotional enlightenment.

Of course the characteristic failed ending of this sort of novel is a burst of unconvincing transcendentalism, an endemic failing of otherwise successful science fiction time out of mind.

This problem would seem to arise out of the literary nature of science fiction itself, rather than out of the current commercial pressures which we will get to later, and indeed, in a way, the danger gets worse the better the book is.

When an action-adventure writer paints himself into a corner, he can always resort to "with a mighty effort, he leapt out of the pit."

But when a science fiction writer of substance spends a whole novel skillfully creating a sense of depth and verisimilitude and preparing the reader for a resolution on the same reality-level, it just won't do to have the hero cobble together satori out of paperclips and toothpicks, or have the Horse Marines arrive with enlightenment in the nick of time.

Take Joe Haldeman's *Buying Time*. Haldeman is one of the solidest writers in the field, every novel he's published (save an unfortunate novelization or two that he'd probably rather forget) is a thoughtfully well-paced, well-realized book, with interesting characters and pleasurable prose. The sort of writer whose work you pick up without scanning the blurb copy and know you won't be bored.

Buying Time is no exception. Haldeman creates a twenty-first century in which you can believe, which not only sounds right, but feels right, with a wealth of technological extrapolations, big and small, a really nice rendering of quotidian life, a fine attention to telling detail. So far, so good.

In this twenty-first century, the Stileman process has enabled selected people to become immortal, a cause for some literary trepidation, for while immortality as a

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theme has produced a certain number of masterpieces, it has also served as the McGuffin for even more superficial power fantasies and transcendental wanks.

But Haldeman, good hard science writer and even better ironic realist that he is, runs some nice changes on the immortality McGuffin by giving us so-called immortality as it would no doubt really be, at least in his timeframe.

The Stileman process isn't a magic pill or virus and it doesn't really make people immortal. Each treatment renews your body for roughly a decade, and it is long, complex, and painful.

Your body?

Maybe not, kiddo.

The Stileman process is also very expensive. You can only get it through the Stileman Foundation, and the price is *everything you have*, with a million dollar floor.

The evil Foundation supplying immortality for the rich while the poor and the ordinary must content themselves with the Biblical ration of three-score and ten? Which must then be destroyed by the virtuous hero who forswears immortality for the sake of justice? Oh no, stop me if I've read this before! In fact, I've written it myself.

But no, Haldeman is a good deal more subtle than that. He provides the Stileman Foundation with a most interesting moral justification for what is usually conventionally regarded as villainy.

If there is going to be an immortality treatment, it is going to be expensive, meaning reserved for the wealthy few who can afford it. Given that prospective immortals are going to have to be rich to begin with to afford their first treatment, immortality, or even life-extension like the Stileman process, is going to end up concentrating wealth, and therefore power, in the hands of a superwealthy immortal elite. Immortals will be selected by Dun and Bradstreet to begin with, and their long lives, even if they don't teach them financial cunning and wisdom, will further enrich them via the process of compound interest, if nothing else.

The Stileman Foundation charges everything you've accumulated before each treatment precisely in order to prevent the establishment of such an immortal elite. If you're rich, you can buy yourself your first treatment, but after that, you start at financial ground zero every ten years or so.

If there is going to be expensive life-extension for the few, this would seem to be about as just and democratic a way to ration it as can be devised. Every ten years or so, each temporary immortal must accumulate his next million from scratch just like everyone else. Call it social Darwinism at its most extreme, or call it the ultimate meritocracy, this system at least has the virtue of returning the immortal to the level of the indigent masses every decade or so.

Well, sort of, for Haldeman is too much the realist to expect you to buy that completely. Even though

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it violates the contract, there are always shady round-about ways of stashing *some* assets somehow, and the more often you have to do it, the better you get at it. Also, of course, once you've made a million once, you've already got a better idea than most about how to do it again. And again. And again.

So most Stileman repeaters have a way of causing money to stick to their fingers, or they wouldn't be Stileman repeaters. They tend to stay ahead of the game far enough to buy their next treatment, but they can't really hold on to enough capital to become an elite that rules the world.

Dallas Barr is one of these Stileman repeaters, one of the oldest people in the solar system. He's been through many changes, and Haldeman does a fine job of rendering the psyche of a character who has to start from scratch every ten years or so, who has to make a million or die.

Haldeman might have given us a fine novel just by showing us what he has to do to make his next million, or an even better one showing us what one becomes having to do it over and over again down through the decades, not just in terms of the pragmatics, which could certainly be interesting in and of themselves, but in terms of what sort of moral creature emerges from such a peculiar evolutionary process in a century or two.

But that's not what Haldeman has chosen to do. Instead, he has chosen to structure his novel around the deconstruction of his set-up, and that's where the trouble would seem to begin.

"The world is not what it seems," is a common enough ploy, and there's no particular reason why it can't work again. Barr is drawn into a mystery concerning the Stileman Foundation, begins to learn things about its power-mad leadership, then things about the process itself, and . . .

Well, it isn't fair to give away too much of a story like this, which has the structure of a mystery of sorts, both criminal and scientific, especially here, where Haldeman ably uses it all as the spine of an entertaining and thoughtful novel that will not leave you outraged or feeling cheated at the end.

But, given the quality of what has gone on before, indeed, especially given the quality of what has gone on before, the ending did leave me feeling somewhat disappointed.

In a tortuous attempt to elucidate why without giving away anything that will ruin the book for readers, let me just say that not only does the protagonist end up more or less permanently immortal, but possessed of various transcendent powers dropped like an egg in his eternal beer, a member of a kind of new super race. "We blinked and found the playground had suddenly become infinite" as Haldeman says in the last line.

Sorry, Joe, that's the Disney version. Science fiction has seen all too much of it, and it weakens the res-

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olution of a novel that deserved much better.

Haldeman set up a moral question about immortality that many writers have set up before. And, at least for my money, he came up with a moral solution to the problem of expensive life extension that no one had ever thought of before. He saw his way through to at least a form of rough justice in an inherently unjust situation. Bravo!

But then he built *Buying Time* around a deconstruction of that moral creation, so I suppose it's no wonder that he gave his protagonist godlike powers at the end and hoped that it would satisfy the readers emotionally to the point where they wouldn't notice that the ending wasn't a resolution of the theme, but only a resolution of the plotline, that indeed it rather contradicts the thematic insights of the rest of the book.

It's about the oldest trick in the science fiction book. When the transcendence is thematically justified by what has gone on before, it works on deeper levels too, indeed on the deepest level there is, on a moral and spiritual level, but here it's just the standard smoke and mirrors, no matter how well done.

Which is not at all to say that a successful resolution to a novel necessarily has to be either a moral affirmation or a happy ending. No tragedy ever written does that, and tragedies represent some of the literary masterpieces of the species.

Perhaps on a somewhat less lofty level, take *Sunglasses After Dark* by Nancy A. Collins, an almost perfect first novel that raises the notorious splatterpunk genre perilously close to high art. And if you do not believe me, believe Mae West—"Goodness has nothing to do with it."

The central character of *Sunglasses After Dark* is Sonja Blue, a vampire. No Transylvanian peasants and thick Hungarian accents here; as the title implies, she is a thoroughly modern, thoroughly urban, more or less punk vampire, and Collins tells the whole story in a switchblade-sharp, wise-cracking, politically mordant, and ironic prose style that is a pleasure to read all the way through.

The second viewpoint is Catherine Wheele, a televangelist with baleful psychic power who is a vampire of a different and far more evil sort.

Sonja has been made a vampire in the usual manner, albeit in the back seat of a Rolls-Royce after having been picked up as a sappy would-be flower-child in a disco in Swinging London. From the moment we meet her in a padded cell in the bughouse, Sonja invades people's dreams, inflicts gory deaths on victims, justified and otherwise, leaves a trail of carnage and mayhem wherever she goes, and in general behaves like the creature of the modern night she is.

But this is the nature Sonja has been given by the vampire who first stuck his fangs in her throat; while she commits endless acts of

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savagery, she is only following her nature, living out her karma.

Indeed, she struggles against that nature. She spends long periods copping her blood in bottles on the black market. She seeks to inflict her vengeance on the vampire who turned her into this thing. She is capable of acts of human kindness. She protects the third viewpoint character, Claude Hagerty, the hapless and well-meaning mental institution orderly who has gotten involved with her story. She may not exactly be a vampire with a heart of gold, but she *is* a vampire with mordant self-insight and a conscience.

Catherine Wheele, on the other hand, is a *self-made* vampire. She has *chosen* to use her morally neutral psychic powers in the service of greed. Greed for money, greed for power, greed for sadistic sexual satisfaction. Indeed, she would have been just as big a moral monster without them.

Without revealing too much of the plot, let me say that it is Catherine who had Sonja thrown into the nuthouse, for reasons having to do with continuing to fleece the rich mother of the girl she once was, and the central story is the conflict between them, though there is much, much more.

Without revealing too much of the ending, let me say that while it could be taken as a ruthlessly moral one of a certain kind, only Sonja lives ever after, and not exactly happily. And the last line of the novel is one of those rare perfect ones that not only ends it with an apt one-liner, but a one-liner that, without getting cute about it, makes one think about what one has just read with just the right subtle alteration.

If there is such a thing as "splatterpunk," *Sunglasses After Dark* is surely an archetypal example, and if there is such a thing as a splatterpunk masterpiece, Nancy A. Collins has written it, or at least what is far and away the best thing to emerge from this sensibility.

And not just because the prose is startlingly mature and worldly-wise for a first novel, or because the story is perfectly paced, or because the characters are well-rendered and original, or because the invention is arresting and the detailing vivid; *Sunglasses After Dark* is that rarity among first novels, and particularly, it would seem, among first novels in the extended SF genre, a novel that comes to a satisfying closure.

The ending is truly satisfying because it brings together the action climax to the plot, the dynamics of the characters, and the psychological and moral themes of the novel in a way that neither violates what has gone on before in terms of character transformations, breaks tone, nor vitiates the integrity of the whole with a sappy forced happy ending. The grace note of the last line snaps it all off with a nice little flourish, like a matador turning his back on a bull he has just finished perfectly mesmerizing with his capework.

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More often, unfortunately, you get something like *On My Way to Paradise*, a first novel by Dave Wolverton. Though this is definitely science fiction, and hardly punk—splatter, cyber, or otherwise—it shares several virtues of *Sunglasses After Dark*. Wolverton also is far more accomplished on a prose level than anyone has a right to expect from a first novelist. This is also a tough-minded novel of a somewhat different sort. Wolverton's eye for description and his invention of telling detail is at least as good as Collins's, and here it is much more important to the successful telling of the tale, since *On My Way to Paradise* takes place in a highly unstandard future Panama, a starship in transit, and on Baker, the planet at the other end, where its cargo of mercenaries are being sent to fight for the Motoki Corporation against the Yabajin.

Don Angelo Osic is one of these mercenaries, a morphogenic pharmacologist, a kind of scientific brujo in small-town Panama, who chances to rescue a mysterious woman named Tamara with connection to higher forces, involving himself in a series of messes that leaves him the murderer of a military assassin and unjustly charged with his friend Flaco's murder, forcing him to sign on as Motoki Corporation gunfodder in order to escape.

Angelo narrates the whole story in first person, and Wolverton obviously knows Latin America and Latin Americans, for Angelo is no standard gringo in Hispanic clothing. All the other major characters are Hispanic, and Wolverton's future Panama and complex Latin American culture are a first-rate work of extrapolation, with political savvy and real cultural depth.

The trouble begins in the long, long middle of the book, which takes place on the starship. Well, sort of. On the starship, the mercenaries are divided up into combat teams, and put through endless, and I do mean endless, simulations of the battles to come against the Yabajin, which is to say a deadening percentage of the wordage takes place in a kind of combat game reality, and consists of slambang action loops.

Okay, admittedly, a certain amount of character relationships are elucidated through all this combat, and we do see the emergence of Angelo's combat team as a little society. But this long middle is all too reminiscent of Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game*, where much the same thing was used to help pad a tight novella out into a bloated novel.

Nothing wrong so far that a ruthless blue pencil couldn't have cured in the editing process, and indeed should have, since this book runs 514 pages, and failing to reach novel length was never exactly a problem.

But on the starship, we meet the Motoki Corporation Samurai, and Wolverton's conceptualization of the Japanese is as shallow as his rendering of his future Latin Americans is authentic. The Mo-

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toki Samurai are straight out of second-rate Toho productions, and their enemies, the Yabajin, are reminiscent of faceless Saturday morning Japanese cartoon product. The Motoki Corporation itself is just what you'd expect from this, the anthill zaibatsu in space, down to the fervent raving of the company song by fanatic salarymen.

It may be indelicate to suggest this, but this borders perilously close to racism. When everything else rings with depth and realism, such a cartoon version of the stereotypical Japanese, however unintentionally, calls embarrassing attention to itself, both as a literary failing and as a failure of empathy. If these were stereotypical blacks in a ghetto, there would be cries of outrage. If these were Frito Banditos, indeed if they were a cartoon version of the very Hispanic mercenaries that Wolverton actually portrays with such sympathy and insight, Wolverton himself would probably be outraged.

Indeed, perhaps Wolverton *was* aware of this on some level, for when they finally arrive on Baker, his mercenaries find themselves facing the Yabajin as an enemy as abstractly perceived as they were in the simulations, and fighting for a cartoon nightmare Japanese corporate dystopia that even *they* experience as one-dimensional.

The inevitable happens. The mercenaries rebel against their vile employers, annihilate both sides, and capture Baker for themselves.

Aside from the depthless Japanese culture straw man, the endless action-loops in the combat simulator, and the somewhat excessive repetition of same in real-time on Baker, this is a good, tough-minded, ironic, wise, and knowing piece of military science fiction that proceeds to its true conclusion with the inevitability of true tragedy arising out of character.

Unfortunately, Wolverton doesn't let the true ending stand. Instead, he allows a subplot to ripen into the revelation that Angelo's ambivalent and complex character has been a sham all along and so are many of the formative memories that he's narrated. His personality has been edited and rewritten by Tamara for her own ruthlessly pragmatic purposes.

He's really someone else, or rather a suddenly much nicer version of himself, able to deliver liberal sermons on peace and tolerance, and deserve to get the girl.

"With a sudden revelation of the true nature of reality, he stopped being such a shit," is even worse than "with a mighty effort, he leapt out of the pit."

The unreliable narrator is a legitimate and workable technique, and a sudden complete character transformation in a climactic moment of enlightenment can be the perfect closure to a novel if everything else has built up to it, and the writer is up to rendering it convincingly. But to have your narrator wake up out of his dream in

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the denouement and tell you that key chunks of what made him what he was were illusion is, well, just plain silly, the perfect textbook example of the utterly forced happy ending.

Wolverton at least brought his novel to a semblance of its true closure before he mucked it up with this sophomoric second ending, and his failure was at least one of literary insight. At least he was *trying* to give his novel a real resolution.

Which is more than you can say for the great ream of five novel trilogies and episodic shared-universe production formats and open-ended drekologies that have become the dominant publishing mode in the SF genre.

Here, a real closure is deliberately to be avoided, for the ideal is certainly not to leave the readers feeling that they have experienced completed perfection, but to get them to buy the next episode.

True, it is possible to have your running characters mutate and even mature from episode to episode like a soap opera, but the trouble with a soap opera is that it never reaches closure, it just goes on and on and on until it gets canceled. With this kind of stuff, you can't have a truly satisfying ending to any episode because you can't have a real ending at all. Every ending must be a transition to the next episode.

If this sounds like literary television, well, what the hell else do you think it is? Like television, it is ordered up by the distributors, produced to format by entertainment conglomerates, written for the most part by mercenaries, and designed to encourage regular consumption for as long as possible.

No, I am not saying that the novel series cannot be a legitimate form, if indeed it is successfully structured in advance as a whole, like *The Alexandria Quartet, The Lord of The Rings*, even, arguably, the first three *Dune* books. But it is very difficult to do, rarely done successfully, and all too much of the SF industry product doesn't even try.

Why should it? In order for a novel series to really work on a literary level, each novel in it must have its own satisfactory closure, while building at the same time to a mega-closure at the end of the last volume, and that is difficult indeed. Besides, who wants to even contemplate a final closure as long as the chains are still ordering well? Certainly not publishers contemplating the bottom line!

Okay, you are probably saying, so there's a great wad of cynical persiflage out there on the racks, but if it isn't even trying to succeed on a literary level, why bother to criticize it for failing to achieve it? Why not just ignore this crap?

And indeed, in this column, you do not generally see criticism of the latest episode in some shared universe series, or the middle four volumes of a best-selling trilogy, or the further adventures of Mung the Barbarian, even though this gubbish has long since come to domi-

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nate what is being published under the logo of "SF."

Still, you do not have to be a Marxist to ultimately face the fact that commercial realities *do* warp literary creation, especially when they start bending writers of real literary worth away from literary virtue and towards the perpetration of literary outrage, not when editors are abandoning their literary responsibilities wholesale in the service of publishing strategies that serve only the bottom line, not when the reader is actually being cheated.

So far we have been dealing with novels which succeed or fail, to one degree or another, to reach a satisfying closure for *literary* reasons. But now we must face the all-too-prevalent commercial cynicism which skews good writers away from even *trying*. And rather than deal with the business-as-usual run of the mill schlock, let us look at an extreme example, a genuine tragedy, Dan Simmons's *Hyperion*, a novel (so-called by the publisher), which I came perilously close to throwing across the room when I finished it.

Not because Simmons is a bad writer, but because he is one of the best writers to come into the field in the past half-decade or so, as he has ably proven with *Kali* and *Carrion Comfort* and *Phases of Gravity*. Not even because *Hyperion* is a cynical piece of schlock or a disappointing failure from a writer from whom one has come to expect much better.

Hyperion may open with a stupefying blizzard of sci-fi jargon, but once Simmons has shoved the context down the reader's throat in one great big wad, once that admittedly necessary wad is digested, *Hyperion* becomes something interesting, indeed, even rare for SF, *formally* interesting.

Simmons has created a complex interstellar culture, with the Earth destroyed in a nicely non-standard manner, replete with new religions, three or four different modes of interstellar travel including teleportation, space barbarians known as Ousters living in can cities between the stars, Artificial Intelligences, und so wieter.

And if it all seems like yard goods initially, once the story really gets going it accumulates more and more specificity, reality, and depth. Simmons achieves this unexpected transformation via his skillful choice of form, not that his choice of form is all that untraditional in literary terms.

On the planet Hyperion, the so-called Time Tombs exist in a strange temporal anomaly, watched over by the Shrike, a mysterious alien, or artifact, or *something* from the future or the past or an alternate reality, that seems to murder at random, and around whose existence an interstellar religion has accreted.

Start with a mystery.

Add jeopardy. On the eve of an impending Ouster attack, the Shrike starts moving beyond its usual territory, the time fields

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around the Tombs start acting more strangely than ever, and there are indications that the Time Tombs will soon open, revealing whatever has been lurking for eons inside.

The Church of the Shrike, which controls access to the Time Tombs, selects seven people, for unknown reasons all its own, to make the pilgrimage across space, across the surface of Hyperion, to a rendezvous with this moment of destiny.

As they travel toward the Time Tombs, while the real-time story creeps slowly along in the background, they tell their back-stories to each other. Surprisingly enough, it works. Simmons keeps the real-time story interesting enough on its own, and doesn't so much use the tale-telling to fill in necessary background as to add layer after layer of resonance, depth, detail, and insight to the sketch of the background we already know.

For of course the pilgrims have been chosen because they have past connections with Hyperion and the Shrike. And the varying means of interstellar travel and the profusion of "time-debts" implied allows Simmons to give us characters who have known Hyperion and the Shrike over centuries. One by one, they tell the stories, each one adding a new level of overlay to what Simmons is building up, in terms of plot complications, in terms of realities within realities within realities, turning the impending confrontation with the Shrike into a transcendent moment of destiny.

As the real-time story moves closer and closer to that moment, the multiple meanings of that moment exfoliate their depths, you realize how beautifully Simmons has orchestrated this form, taken the retrospective sequential travelers' tales form that is at least as old as Chaucer, and used it to structure an entire 482 page novel toward a single perfect moment of completion.

But . . .

Oh no! He's not really going to do *that*! Say it ain't so, Dan!

But it is. He does. As you get past page three hundred or so, and weigh the wordage of the tales already told against the thickness of what you have left to read, you begin to get nervous. After he's finished all the travelers' tales, there's not going to be enough pages left to do full justice to the final confrontation with the Shrike. Simmons didn't run out of gas at the end, did he? He's not going to race through the climax in a final fatigued twenty pages or so?

He isn't.

It's much worse that that.

When all the tales are finally told, the pilgrims are in sight of the Time-Tombs, the Ouster invasion has begun, and off they march to face the Shrike singing "Off to See the Wizard," I kid you not.

Fade to black.

Continued next week.

I only refrained from throwing the book across the room because the blurb copy *did* say that Simmons was working on a sequel, and

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I should have known the ending would therefore likely be something less than fully satisfying. But a 482 page novel that ends with the deliberate antithesis of closure, with a cliff-hanger ending that's nothing but a commercial for the next book, really *is* a bit over the top for commercial chutzpah, even in these cynical days.

Even in a novel series, the writer owes the reader *some* kind of satisfaction at the end of each episode rather than using an entire novel to bait the sales hook for the next book. It may not be easy to do, it may seldom really succeed, it may entail inevitable compromise, but at least the writer owes the reader the old college try.

Orson Scott Card, for example, is writing what has been billed as a six-volume novel series called "The Tales of Alvin Maker," though if the sales hold up, who knows. It's hard to judge from the early novels in a series of such length just where it is all going, if it's going anywhere at all, but in at least the second novel, *Red Prophet*, Card has managed to produce something of internal interest that can stand on its own, even at the climax.

The first novel in the series, *Seventh Son,* was, well, a set-up for a series. We meet young Alvin on the frontier of an alternate late eighteenth century balkanized America where certain magics work, and we watch him come into his powers as a future man of destiny in some subsequent book. It sort of works as a bildungsroman, concluding with a young boy's glimmering awareness of his destiny, but since that destiny is going to be played out through at least five more books, *Seventh Son* really can't come to any meaningful closure.

With book two, *Red Prophet*, however, Card gives evidence that, having expended the first volume in set-up, he may have found a way to turn the next five episodes into real novels; whether he can pull it off again remains to be seen, but at least he's managed to do it here.

Alvin Maker is still a young boy and he's still somewhat central to the action, but his isn't the real story of *Red Prophet*, and that's probably why the novel succeeds on its own.

Red Prophet is really the story of Ta-Kumsaw, Lolla-Wossiky, and Bill Harrison. Card's alternate post-Colonial America is filled with analogs of historical figures, and these three are, respectively, the chief we know as Tecumseh, his alcoholic mystical brother, and William Henry Harrison, old Tippecanoe himself, who, in our world, became President of the United States in large part by being the legendary hero of that now-notorious slaughter of native Americans.

The story of *Red Prophet* is the story of the battle of Tippecanoe; the whole novel leads up to it, and it provides a satisfying apotheosis of Card's theme and story here.

This is not our America, and Card's vision of the conquest of the continent by the white man, while not exactly novel, is traditionally

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revisionist, with manifest destiny and suburbia to come as the villain, and the Indians as the noble victims in mystical communion with the land that the soulless developers are killing spiritually dead.

Ta-Kumsaw becomes the mystically anointed war chief of a united Indian front; Lolla-Wossiky becomes a kind of transcendent red Gandhi, the "Red Prophet" of the title; and Tippecanoe becomes a mystical event with an entirely different outcome, one that changes the course of history toward whatever is going to emerge over the next four books.

Yes, young Alvin becomes involved in the struggle of Ta-Kumsaw and the vision quests of Lolla-Wossiky, and yes, inevitably the climax reveals him as one of the darlings of destiny once more, and yes, there are a lot of hooks to subsequent episodes buried in the worm, but because Card focuses on telling a powerful and meaningful story with a beginning, a middle, and a thematically apt end, an innocent reader can emerge from the novel satisfied without even knowing that the book is part of a series.

Red Prophet is a novel about the conflict between what is in the process of becoming our technological civilization and a way of life in mystical communion with the land, coming down foursquarely on the side of the greens, and letting them, in the person of the American Indians, preserve their patrimony for the ages; not via victory in battle, but via an act of visionary self-sacrifice.

It succeeds because Card lets that transcendent moment bring the novel to a resonant and self-contained conclusion. Whether he can keep doing this in subsequent installments may be problematical, but here at least he has tried, and succeeded, and proven that it *can* be done.

And if it can be done, then editors should be trying to get the authors of all those episodes in all those series to at least make the attempt, instead of discouraging their development as literary craftsmen by failing to deal with matters of structure and closure and publishing work that ends in mid-air.

Okay, okay, I know that novel series are what the book chain buyers and the independent distributors are convinced they must have, and I know all too well that their word is economic law. Maybe this is even what the mass audience for SF really wants.

At any rate, it seems all too clear that no science fiction line is going to survive as a whole on the racks for very long without being demographically dominated by this stuff. It's a fact of publishing life with which even the most idealistic editor must compromise.

But, come on, can't it *be* a compromise between literature and commerce, between the episodic format and the integrity of the episode? Can't we at least have *some* editorial standards for this stuff?

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Can't some semblance of the contract between writer and reader be upheld even here?

When a writer interests a reader in a piece of fiction with an interesting beginning, and keeps the reader's tension level and excitement building and building through a whole novel-length book, then the writer is surely committed morally to the attempt to conclude with a satisfying intellectual and emotional release at the end. In *everything* that is published within the covers of a book.

To try, and to fail, is no dishonor. That's what editors are supposed to be for, to spot the failures, do their best to help their writers fix them, and then decide whether the results are worthy of the lives of all those trees.

Not trying to leave the reader emotionally and intellectually satisfied at the end of every novel, however, is just not doing justice, either to the customer, or to the most basic principle of the tale-teller's commitment, and an editor who doesn't at least try to hold his writers to it, let alone encourages them to violate it, is just not doing his job.

There is a literary lesson to learn from even the sleaziest of hookers.

The job doesn't end when you've gotten them all hot and bothered.

The job doesn't end till you've gotten them properly off. ●

NEXT ISSUE

Nebula and World Fantasy Award-winner **Lucius Shepard** returns to these pages next month with a big new novella, our July cover story, the spine-chilling "Skull City." Skull City is *not quite* Manhattan—it's an alternate Manhattan, existing parallel to the Big Apple we all know and love in some mysterious dimension, on some dark world that is not quite our own. Like its counterpart in our world, it's a place full of deadly dangers and hidden traps for the unwary, but it is also a place of wild magic and secret mystic Powers, where evil sorcerers rule from sinister black towers, and strange creatures lurk in the shadows. When Larson, junkie, street-hustler, and sometime purse-snatcher, is translated to this eerie shadowland, he finds that he must fight for his life or be killed—or worse! Hugo-winner **Mike Resnick** is also on hand for July, and in "The Manamouki," another of his hugely popular "Kirinyaga" stories, he takes us to an orbiting space colony that has been reshaped into the likeness of ancient Kenya, for another story of cultural conflict and hard choices, one which demonstrates that the price of acceptance is often bitter—and sometimes just too high.

ALSO IN JULY: **Michael Cassutt** returns after a long absence with a passionate and powerful tale of a very curious medical phenomenon, in "At Risk"; **Isaac Asimov** serves up the latest George and Azazel story, this one a sprightly demonstration that "Wine Is a Mocker"; Campbell Award-winner **Karen Joy Fowler** returns to give us a bittersweet look at Einstein and the *real* problems of rel-

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ativity, in "Lieserl"; new writer **R.V. Branham** returns to question just *how* much knowledge is really *good* for us, in the—dare I say it?—haunting "And Ghost Stories"; and new writer **Nancy Sterling** makes her *IAsfm* debut with the sly and funny tale of a young girl and her encounter with very last sort of creature you'd expect to find in a dusty little town in the middle of Texas, in the wry story of "The Recital." Plus an array of columns and features. Look for our July issue on sale on your newsstands on May 29, 1990.

COMING SOON: A major, angry new essay by **Harlan Ellison,** plus stories by **Keith Roberts, Janet Kagan, Ian McDonald, Alexander Jablokov, Judith Moffett, Neal Barrett, Jr., Nancy Kress, Walter Jon Williams,** and many others.

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

There's more to May cons nowadays than just the Memorial Day rush, including lots of specialized cons. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me a SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at Box 3343, Fairfax VA 22038. Early evening's usually a good time to call cons (most are home phones; identify yourself and your reason for calling right off). When writing cons, enclose an SASE (again, say what you're asking about). Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.

May, 1990

4-6—**Corflu.** For info, write: % **Eisenberg, 99 Joralemon #6D, Brooklyn NY 11201.** Or call **(718) 624-0303 or 330-5161, or (212) 984-7261** (10 am to 10 pm, not collect). Con will be held in: New York City area (if city omitted, same as in address). Guests have not been announced. A con for fanzine fans.

4-6—**RocKon. (501) 370-0889.** Otter Creek Holiday Inn, Little Rock AR. G.A. Effinger, the Farrans.

4-6—**PhoenixCon.** Holiday Inn Powers Landing, Atlanta GA. "Literary SF" con. P. Anthony, Lindahns.

11-13—**MisCon, Box 9363, Missoula MT 59807. (406) 549-1435.** Elizabeth Scarborough, Phil Foglio.

11-13—**Oasis, Box 616469, Orlando FL 32861. (407) 725-2383 or 295-0228.** J. Vinge, Joe Haldeman.

11-13—**Horrorfest, Box 277652, Riverdale IL 60627.** Denver CO. Chelsea Quinn Yarbro.

11-13—**Galaxy Fair, Box 150471, Arlington TX 76015. (817) 572-5547.** L. M. Bujold. Art oriented.

18-20—**MarCon, Box 211101, Columbus OH 43221. (614) 262-7266.** G. Martin, M. Snodgress, G. Wilson.

18-20—**SFeraCon, Ivanicgradska 41a, Zagreb 41000, Yugoslavia. Phone (41) 57-46-23 or 21-71-22.**

25-27—ConQuest, Box 36212, Kansas City MO 64111. M. Snodgress, D. Sweet, D. Means, Brad Denton.

25-27—**KeyCon, Box 3178, Winnipeg MB R3C 4E6.** C.J. Cherryh, Jo Clayton, David Cherry, De Lints.

25-27—**VCon, Box 48478, Bentall Stn., Vancouver BC V7X 1A2.** E. Scarborough, D. Duncan, E. Lynn.

25-28—**MediaWestCon, % Carleton, 200 E. Thomas, Lansing MI 48906. (517) 372-0738.** Media stress.

25-28—**DisClave, 1200 Waynewood Blvd., Alexandria VA 22308.** New Carrollton MD (near Wash. DC).

August, 1990

23-27—**ConFiction, % Box 1252, BGS, New York NY 10274.** Hague, Holland. WorldCon. $85 to 7/15.

30-Sept. 3—**ConDiego, Box 15771, San Diego CA 92115.** North American SF Con. $75 to end of June.

August, 1991

29-Sep. 2—**ChiCon V, Box A3120, Chicago IL 60690.** WorldCon. Clement, Powers. $75 to 7/31/90.

August, 1992

28-Sep. 1—**MagiCon, Box 621992, Orlando FL 32862. (407) 275-0027.** The 1992 World SF Con. $65.

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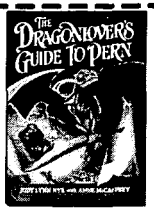

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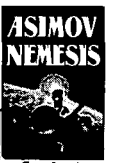

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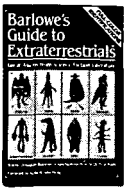

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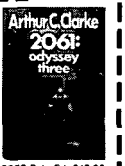

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